LIBRARY
OF THE
THEOLOGICAL SEMINARY,
AT
PRINCETON, N. J.

DONATION OF
SAMUEL AGNEW,
OF PHILADELPHIA, PA.

Letter
No.
March 15th 1855.

Case. SCC
Shelf.
Book.

SERMONS

BY

ROBERT GORDON, D. D.,

ONE OF THE MINISTERS OF THE HIGH CHURCH, EDINBURGH,

AND

LATE OF HOPE PARK CHAPEL, ST. CUTHBERT'S.

FOURTH EDITION.

EDINBURGH:
JOHN JOHNSTONE, HUNTER SQUARE,
AND JAMES NISBET AND CO., LONDON.

MDCCCXXXVII.

TO THE

CONGREGATION OF HOPE PARK CHAPEL,

THE FOLLOWING SERMONS

ARE

AFFECTIONATELY INSCRIBED.

Edinburgh,
18th August, 1825.

CONTENTS.

SERMON I.

THE UNGODLINESS OF THE HUMAN HEART.

Page.

And he said, I heard thy voice in the garden, and I was afraid, because I was naked; and I hid myself.—GEN. iii. 10. . 1

SERMON II.

THE UNGODLINESS OF WORLDLY PURSUITS.

By the strength of my hand I have done it, and by my wisdom, for I am prudent.—ISAIAH x. 13. 23

SERMON III.

THE TENDENCY OF MORAL EVIL TO PERPETUATE ITSELF.

And he shall give Israel up because of the sins of Jeroboam, who did sin, and who made Israel to sin.—1 KINGS xiv. 16. . 44

SERMON IV.

GOD MANIFEST IN THE FLESH.

But will God in very deed dwell with men on the earth!—2 CHRONICLES vi. 18. 65

SERMON V.

THE REWARD OF THE REDEEMER'S SUFFERINGS.

He shall see of the travail of his soul, and shall be satisfied.—ISAIAH liii. 11. 87

SERMON VI.

THE UNSATISFYING NATURE OF WORLDLY ENJOYMENTS.

Page.

Wherefore do ye spend money for that which is not bread, and your labour for that which satisfieth not?—Isaiah lv. 2. . 108

SERMON VII.

DANGER OF DELAYING TO SEEK THE LORD.

Seek ye the Lord while he may be found, call ye upon him while he is near.—Isaiah lv. 6. 130

SERMON VIII.

THE NECESSITY AND NATURE OF REPENTANCE.

Let the wicked forsake his way, and the unrighteous man his thoughts; and let him return unto the Lord, and he will have mercy upon him; and to our God, for he will abundantly pardon.—Isaiah lv. 7. 152

SERMON IX.

GOD'S WAYS NOT MAN'S WAYS.

For my thoughts are not your thoughts, neither are your ways my ways, saith the Lord. For as the heavens are higher than the earth, so are my ways higher than your ways, and my thoughts than your thoughts.—Isaiah lv. 8, 9. 175

SERMON X.

THE NECESSITY OF REGENERATION.

For ye were sometimes darkness, but now ye are light in the Lord.—Ephesians v. 8. 196

SERMON XI.

THE MEANS OF REGENERATION.

Being born again, by the word of God.—1 Peter i. 23. . 216

SERMON XII.

PEACE OF MIND NECESSARY TO CHEERFUL OBEDIENCE.

Page.

I will run the way of thy commandments, when thou shalt enlarge my heart.—Psalm cxix. 32. 237

SERMON XIII.

THE EFFECTS OF FAITH EXEMPLIFIED IN THE CHARACTER OF GIDEON.

Faint, yet pursuing.—Judges viii. 4. 256

SERMON XIV.

THE EFFECTS OF FAITH EXEMPLIFIED IN THE CHARACTER OF GIDEON.

Faint, yet pursuing.—Judges viii. 4. 282

SERMON XV.

THE HUMBLEST BELIEVER AN INSTRUMENT OF GOOD.

And she said unto her mistress, Would God my lord were with the prophet that is in Samaria! for he would recover him of his leprosy.—2 Kings v. 3. 307

SERMON XVI.

FREE GRACE ILLUSTRATED IN THE HISTORY OF NAAMAN.

And his servants came near, and spake unto him, and said, My father, if the prophet had bid thee do some great thing, wouldest thou not have done it? how much rather then, when he saith to thee, wash and be clean.—2 Kings v. 13. . . . 329

SERMON XVII.

DANIEL'S PRAYER.

And I set my face unto the Lord God, to seek by prayer and supplications, with fasting, and sackcloth, and ashes.—Dan. ix. 3. 350

SERMON XVIII.

ANSWER TO DANIEL'S PRAYER.

Page.

And whiles I was speaking, and praying, and confessing my sin, and the sin of my people Israel, and presenting my supplication before the Lord my God, for the holy mountain of my God; yea, whiles I was speaking in prayer, even the man Gabriel, whom I had seen in the vision at the beginning, being caused to fly swiftly, touched me about the time of the evening oblation. And he informed me, and talked with me, and said, O Daniel, I am now come forth to give thee skill and understanding. At the beginning of thy supplications the commandment came forth, and I am come to show thee; for thou art greatly beloved.—DANIEL ix. 20—23. 374

SERMON XIX.

GOD KNOWETH THE HEART.

Thou understandest my thought afar off.—PSALM cxxxix. 2. . 395

SERMON XX.

INIQUITY IN THE HEART A HINDERANCE TO PRAYER.

If I regard iniquity in my heart, the Lord will not hear me.—PSALM lxvi. 18. 415

SERMON XXI.

OUR SALVATION WROUGHT OUT WITH FEAR AND TREMBLING.

Work out your own salvation with fear and trembling.—PHIL. ii. 12. 435

SERMON XXII.

GOD WORKING IN US A MOTIVE TO PERSEVERANCE.

For it is God which worketh in you, both to will and to do of his good pleasure.—PHIL. ii. 13. 459

SERMONS.

SERMON I.

THE UNGODLINESS OF THE HUMAN HEART.

GEN. iii. 10.

And he said, I heard thy voice in the garden, and I was afraid, because I was naked; and I hid myself.

THE point to which our attention is naturally directed by these words, is the state of mind in which Adam must have been when he made the confession which they record; and it may perhaps aid us in forming a clearer conception of that state, as well as facilitate the application of the subject, if we advert for a moment to the circumstances in which he was originally placed. Of the condition of our first parents, indeed, and of the events that took place during their continuance in a state of innocence, comparatively little has been recorded in Scripture; and as the Bible is the only source whence any information on the subject can be drawn, our knowledge of that condition must necessarily be limited. But, while an unprofitable curiosity may complain, that it cannot find where-

withal to be gratified, in the scanty materials which the inspired historian has furnished for idle speculation on the primitive state of man, the humble and devout inquirer will find enough to exhibit, in a very affecting light, the magnitude of the loss that has been sustained by his apostacy; and a very little reflection, on the few matters of fact that have been recorded, will be sufficient to convey to us some idea of the guilt and wretchedness into which he fell.

I would advert then, in the first instance, to the emphatic declaration of the sacred historian, that man was created in the image of his maker; an expression which conveys a very elevated idea of the dignity of his nature, and of the moral excellence that adorned it. From the perversion, indeed, of our moral principles, and our consequent inaptitude for spiritual exercises, and incapacity for spiritual enjoyment, we may be little able to conceive aright of such a condition. We know, however, from what is elsewhere stated in scripture, that it must necessarily have implied worthy conceptions of the divine character, and the conformity of every desire to the divine will; and we cannot fail, therefore, to perceive, that a creature so constituted must have been in the actual enjoyment of happiness, up to the full measure of his capacity, and the full extent of divine revelation which was vouchsafed to him. But besides this general account of man's original condition, as

qualified for holding fellowship with God, various circumstances have been stated, whereby we are given to understand, that he was honoured with special manifestations of the presence and the favour of his maker. In the blessing that was pronounced upon him immediately after his creation; in the authority with which he was invested over every living thing; in having a special place assigned to him for an habitation, when he was put into the Garden of Eden to dress it and to keep it; in his being commissioned to give names to the various orders of creatures with which he was surrounded; in his receiving immediately from the hand of God an help meet for him in the person of Eve; and in the injunctions that were laid upon him respecting the tree of knowledge of good and evil, we have so many distinct intimations, that while man abode in a state of innocence, the Almighty condescended to hold with him immediate and familiar converse. Independently indeed, of these facts, we might have inferred, from the very language of the verse before us, that such an intercourse as we have now referred to, had previously subsisted between God and our first parents. Not only was the interview, of which the text has recorded a portion, one instance in itself of a special manifestation of the divine presence, but from the answer which Adam returned to the question 'Where art thou?' as well as from what is stated in the preceding verse, it

is evident that the voice of the Lord God in the garden of Eden was to them neither a rare nor an unexpected occurrence; that they had already been familiar with communications of this kind, as forming a part of the established order of God's dealings with them; and that if this well-known voice awakened in their minds any apprehensions of danger, or any forebodings of evil, it was not because they were strangers to such acts of condescension on the part of God, but because some change of character and state had taken place on their own. And if such was the fact, then however inadequate may be our conceptions, both of the nature and extent of the blessedness that was hereby imparted to them, we cannot doubt either that it was a source of enjoyment, or that from this source there was flowing in upon them a continual accession of light and spiritual joy. It is no doubt true, that much has been revealed in scripture regarding the perfections and government of God, with which we must suppose that Adam, even in a state of innocence, was altogether unacquainted; for in the purposes of divine mercy, and in the plans of infinite wisdom for the redemption of an apostate world, there is a revelation of the attributes and character of God, which we cannot conceive could have been unfolded in any other way. But though the believer is thus furnished with a subject of profound admiration of which our first parents were entirely ig-

norant, it is to be remembered that they were equally strangers to the darkness, and perplexity, and fear, by which even the Christian is frequently beset; that not one feeling of suspicion or distrust mingled itself with their conceptions of the divine character, or their consciousness of the divine presence: that they recognised in the voice of God the voice of a Father and a friend, which carried with it an assurance of security, undisturbed by a single doubt, and strengthened filial affections, unalloyed with one wayward desire; and that a sense of their nearness to the fountain of all blessedness, from which nothing but disobedience on their part could ever separate them, imparted an unspeakable value to every blessing which his bounty had so richly provided. However limited then might be their knowledge respecting those attributes of the Godhead, which have been especially unfolded in the redemption of sinners, they must have derived from what they did know of the divine character, a purity and an intenseness of enjoyment which can only be felt in a state of entire freedom from sin; and believing, as I apprehend we are warranted to do, that every new communication coming directly from God must have extended the boundaries of that knowledge, I should not hesitate to say, that the special manifestations, which he vouchsafed to make of himself to our first parents in paradise, were the immediate source of the purest, and the most elevated happiness

which they enjoyed, during the period of their residence in that abode of innocence and peace.

I do not think that in these remarks I have in any respect exceeded what we are warranted to conceive of the satisfaction and delight which our first parents experienced, when God vouchsafed to honour them with special manifestations of his presence; and though we can form but a very inadequate estimate of what on such occasions they really felt, yet we cannot, I think, doubt, that every new intimation of his approach brought with it a new accession of unmingled blessedness. And if it did so, how fearful the ruin that must have been wrought in their moral constitution, how dark and desolate the condition into which they had fallen, and how unutterable the agony that they must have endured, before they could feel, and express themselves, as we find them doing in the words of the text: "I heard thy voice in the garden, and I was afraid, because I was naked; and I hid myself!" Nobody can require to be told how it was that this melancholy revolution took place, or reminded that the deliberate violation of a positive command, enforced by the most solemn sanctions, had armed against them the holy displeasure of that Almighty being who had hitherto been to them all their portion, and all their desire—a being in whose omnipotence they had till that moment reposed with the consciousness of undisturbed security, and whose inex-

haustible bounty had furnished the means of gratification, to the full extent of their capacity of enjoyment. If they thought therefore of God at all, or if they retained any distinct idea of his character, the prospect that opened upon them must have been as appalling as if the whole frame and constitution of the universe had been subverted—as if beneficence had ceased to pervade the works and ways of God, and had given place to the unsparing exercise of his avenging wrath—and as if there were no place of safety or of security for them, but in the desperate attempt to withdraw themselves from the presence of him in whom they lived, and moved, and had their being. And while every object that had formerly ministered to their enjoyment was thus reminding them from what they had fallen; while the beauty and magnificence of creation had ceased to convey to them any pledge of happiness and peace; and while, amidst the rich and varied provision which had originally been made for their subsistence and comfort, there was nothing with which they dared to look for a father's blessing; the bitterness of every other feeling must have been unspeakably aggravated by the reflection, that they were themselves the authors of all their calamities—that they had deliberately thrown away all that infinite wisdom and infinite goodness had bestowed upon them for their full and permanent felicity—and that in as far as they were them-

selves concerned, they had, by an act of wilful disobedience, converted the paradise of God into a waste howling wilderness. It is evident, indeed, from the text, that the ideas which they entertained of the being and perfections of God had, in consequence of their apostacy, been as lamentably perverted as the sentiments which they were disposed to cherish towards him; for whatever apprehension the divine presence might awaken, or however reluctant they might feel to be brought to a reckoning, is it conceivable that they could for one moment have given place to the hopeless idea of concealing themselves from the presence of God amongst the trees of the garden, if they had not been involved in ignorance, as well as overwhelmed with a consciousness of guilt? But though it cannot, I think, be doubted, that the forfeiture of their innocence was accompanied also with the loss of knowledge, yet they still knew enough to render an intimation of the divine presence a source of terror and dismay; and does not our own experience of the intense suffering arising from fears which ignorance aggravates, warrant us to suppose, that the very darkness which, as the effect of their apostacy, hung over their apprehensions of the divine character, and the mystery in which the consequences of their disobedience were yet enveloped, so far from alleviating, served but to embitter the feeling of desolation with which they were depressed? It is

impossible for us indeed to conceive aright of the fears with which they were then haunted, just as it is impossible for us fully to estimate the blessedness which they had forfeited. But the language of the text is an intimation sufficiently intelligible, that spiritual death had already taken effect on them—that their affections had been alienated from God, the moment their conscience testified that they had incurred his displeasure—that so far from having any desire or any capacity for enjoying that intimate converse with him which had before constituted their happiness, they dreaded nothing so much as an approach on his part towards the renewal of that converse—and that they had no prospect of being able to quiet their apprehension in any other way, than by labouring to forget their Creator's existence. "I heard thy voice in the garden, and I was afraid, because I was naked; and I hid myself."

Such are the reflections that have been suggested by the words of the text, viewed in connexion with what we are told in the preceding chapters regarding the primitive condition of our first parents; and though the statement now given is certainly a very imperfect representation of what man was in a state of innocence, and of what he became in consequence of his fall, yet, so far as it goes, it is warranted, I conceive, by what the scriptures have recorded concerning him. Were we to proceed, however, to apply these remarks to

the condition of mankind at large, or were we to allege that what is said of our first parents in the text is substantially true of every individual of their posterity, till by the manifestation of the truth to his conscience, and the regenerating influence of the Holy Spirit on his heart, the perversion of his understanding is rectified, and the enmity of his carnal mind subdued; I am aware that we might be met at the very outset of such an application with the plausible objection, that, unhappy as mankind may be, and sinful as they certainly are, there is nothing, among such at least as are at all acquainted with the scriptures, like that painful apprehension of the presence of God, or that ignorance of his perfections and character, that we have now represented as immediately consequent upon Adam's transgression. Yet plausible as the objection may appear, this is nevertheless the very application that I would make of the subject; and after admitting that there were peculiarities in the case of Adam which do not now exist in the case of any individual, and after conceding too, all that can reasonably be demanded in the way of allowance for these, I would still say, that the symptoms of spiritual death, which appeared so soon and so palpably in our first parents, are yet manifested in their posterity —and that the language of the text, as it has now been explained, is virtually the language of every unrenewed heart.

And, in the first place, with regard to a painful apprehension of the divine presence, I would remark, that though, for very obvious reasons, it does not show itself by the same indications of terror and alarm as in the case before us, yet it appears in the unwillingness which the sinner feels to enter on any thing like a serious contemplation of the divine character, and in the relief which he experiences when he succeeds in shaking off the solemnity of feeling, which such a subject may for a time have generated. The insensibility of the soul indeed to spiritual things, may in some cases be such, as effectually to shut out even the momentary intrusion of any serious reflection on God and eternal things; and it would be vain to expect from persons in this condition any acknowledgment of the truth of what has now been stated. But it will not surely be argued, that the symptoms of spiritual death, to which I am more immediately referring, do not exist, merely because they are not felt, and cannot therefore be acknowledged by those whose case exhibits other symptoms of a still deadlier and more desperate character. They may have no dread of God, just because they have no distinct conception of his character; but to those who are in any degree removed from such a state of spiritual torpor, I would not hesitate to appeal, whether it is not true, that amidst the endless variety of thoughts that are daily and hourly passing

through their minds, there is none which they are less disposed to retain than the thought of God—that they are contented, and gladly so, with an indistinctness of apprehension regarding His character, with which they would not be satisfied on any subject that they thought it of the least importance to their worldly interest to know—and that there is no idea, which they would more reluctantly admit, than one which would bring along with it a vivid impression of his moral purity and perfection? Nor is it any solid objection to the truth of these remarks to say, that such persons can and do deliberately dedicate a portion of every Sabbath, and it may be of every day, to religious exercises,—that they read the Bible, attend on appointed ordinances, and even address themselves to God in the language of supplication. All this may be true, but it proves nothing to the contrary of what has now been affirmed. The employment, in which they are at such seasons occupied, may be externally what is called a religious duty, but with them it is not a spiritual exercise; the ordinances which they observe are ordinances of divine appointment, but that very observance engrosses in their minds the place which should be held by him who appointed them; their thoughts may be engaged on something about God, but they are not fixed in solemn earnestness upon God himself; and could they only be persuaded to make it a subject of serious and

deliberate investigation, they would be astonished to find how long they had been familiar with his name and word, and yet how seldom, how very seldom they have had one distinct and lively impression of his presence, or even of the reality of his existence. That they should regularly take a part in the instituted forms of religious worship, is easily accounted for; and they may contrive to persuade themselves that nothing more than this outward observance is implied in holding fellowship with their maker. But let them retire as it were into the secrets of their own hearts; let them labour to exclude every idea but the simple one of God's being and perfections; and let them concentrate their thoughts on the one important and unquestionable truth, that his eye is upon them, and that he is at the instant making a demand upon them for that homage of love and obedience which they must be conscious they have never paid to him; and that he sees, records, and remembers every vain thought that has excluded him from the place where he ought to have been enthroned in supremacy, as the rightful sovereign of all their affections; and if the experiment be fairly and earnestly set about, it will not fail to reveal to them an unwillingness to think of God, and a reluctance to recognise his presence, which, in the season of thoughtless indifference they never dreamed of, and the existence of which they

would not, perhaps, have been very willing to admit. And supposing that at such a moment, there should come upon them a solemn sense of the presence of God—that they should have such a consciousness of his nearness to them as to feel that they were about to enter, as it were, into immediate and intimate converse with him—and that their thoughts were as intensely fixed upon his character and perfections, as if there were no other being in existence but their Maker and themselves; who is there, among the countless multitudes who are fearlessly living without God, and without hope in the world, that could conceive himself placed in such a situation, and under the influence of such impressions, without trembling and dismay? and who of them would not seek to make his escape from these impressions, with as much eagerness as Adam sought to withdraw himself from the presence of God? Oh! it is a fatal delusion if they suppose that they have less reluctance, or less fear to come into the presence of God than he had; and were they only placed in circumstances where the true state of their hearts could be fully elicited, it would be found that they are virtually saying, as he did, "I heard thy voice, and I was afraid, and I hid myself."

How far the truth of these remarks will be admitted by those to whom they are applicable, is of course a question which I am not competent

to determine. I am persuaded, however, that they are founded in truth, and have frequently been verified by experience; and if so, then our proposition has been so far made out as to show, that a painful apprehension of the divine presence, which appeared as a symptom of spiritual death in our first parents, still exists in their unregenerate offspring; that if it does not show itself in the latter by visible expressions of terror, it is because they have contrived to keep the thought of God at a greater distance from them than the former were able to do; and that they only require to be brought into a state of conscious nearness to him, to draw from them the same lamentable confession that has been recorded in the text.

But I proceed to observe, in the second place, that even the infatuation manifested by our first parents in attempting to conceal themselves from the presence of God, whatever ignorance of the divine perfections it may appear to indicate, is not itself without a parallel in the conduct of their children. There are probably few indeed, among such as have read, or in any way become acquainted with the Bible, who would not readily pronounce that attempt one of the vainest imaginations that ever was entertained, and who would not be disposed also to allege that there is nothing in their own conduct that can possibly be put in comparison with such an

attempt. But I would remind such persons, that the knowledge of God is a very different thing from entertaining certain speculative opinions concerning him, and that many of the elementary truths which the Scriptures have revealed respecting his being, attributes, and government, may be admitted as matters of speculation, and yet have no practical efficacy whatever in preventing a line of conduct utterly inconsistent with the belief of such truths. And in point of fact such is frequently found to be the case. How often does it happen, that they who are professedly alive to the power and wisdom of God, as displayed in creation; to his unbounded beneficence, as it appears in the provision which he has made for the subsistence of his creatures; and to his superintending providence, as manifested in conducting the moral administration of the universe; would, nevertheless, deem it a weakness to show any signs of being deeply affected by a sense of his goodness to themselves individually, or to transfer to the Creator himself any portion of that admiration with which they can descant upon his works? And with all the boasted knowledge, therefore, of the divine perfections which they may fancy they possess, and all the lofty conceptions of his character which they think they entertain, do they not, by withholding the homage which he requires, or refusing to pay it in the way which he has appointed, betray an ignorance of God as

derogatory to his honour, as if they attempted to conceal themselves from his immediate inspection? This, however, is not the nearest approach to the conduct in the text, which is often exemplified among those who profess to know God. How many are there, who, if interrogated on the subject of their religious belief, would, without hesitation, and apparently with much seriousness, admit that God is every where present—that he is the constant witness of every thought of every individual of his creatures—that "he searcheth the heart, and trieth the reins of the children of men" —and that "for all these things he will one day bring them unto judgment;" but who, with this admission on their lips, are shutting out the thought of God from their hearts—pursuing their sinful, or their frivolous courses, with as little apprehension of danger, as if there were no record of human actions, and no reckoning for human offences—and living day after day without one serious or distinct recognition of the presence of Him, whom they nevertheless acknowledge to be omnipresent. Nor can such an inconsistency be either palliated, or even in all cases explained, by resolving it into mere thoughtlessness or inconsideration; for it is a fact, about which there can be no dispute, that with multitudes it has been a painful conflict to resist the intrusion of serious reflection, and shut out solemn impressions of the divine presence; that suspicions of

danger have pursued them through every variety of occupation to which they betook themselves, and thoughts of God have intruded, when apparently farthest from every thing that could bring his existence to their recollection; and that, under the ceaseless remonstrances of an awakened conscience, there has been extorted from them many a resolution of new obedience, which, however short-lived, will remain as recorded evidence, that the habitual recognition of God was the object of their determined and persevering resistance. And what is this but to say, that if they could only forget their Maker, they would be in security and at ease; that if they could cast off the consciousness of his seeing them, they would have no more apprehension of danger than if they were actually concealed from his inspection; and that, in seeking to make their escape from the persecution of their own thoughts, they are really endeavouring to hide themselves from the presence of God, amidst the multiplicity of their worldly pursuits, or the enjoyment of their worldly pleasures? And while instances of a delusion like this are every day occurring, can it be alleged that there was any infatuation in the conduct of our first parents, that has not been exemplified in that of their posterity?

I have thus endeavoured to establish the truth of the proposition, that the symptoms of spiritual death which appeared in man immediately after

his apostacy, however modified or concealed they may be by external circumstances, are still inherent in our fallen nature; that a painful apprehension of the divine presence, and a vain attempt to withdraw himself from it, are still characteristic of every man who is dead in trespasses and in sins; and that what is said concerning Adam in the text, is substantially true of all his children in their unregenerated state. And if this point has been established, then enough has been stated to suggest to every man the misery as well as the guilt of being estranged from God: and, without any farther application of the subject, I might refer to the observations that have already been submitted respecting the condition of man subsequently to the fall, as representing the condition of every impenitent and unbelieving sinner.

But there is one consideration to which I would, in conclusion, for a moment advert, as furnishing a subject of solemn admonition to every man who has enjoyed opportunities of becoming acquainted with the Gospel. If it has been made to appear, that any thing approaching to what is recorded of our first parents in the text, is still to be found in the character and conduct of unbelievers, it cannot, I think, be denied that the excess of infatuation is all on the side of the latter; inasmuch as they have not only had tendered to them, but earnestly urged on their acceptance, proposals

with which the former were, at the period here referred to, entirely unacquainted. When Adam transgressed the divine commandment, there could be nothing to him but a fearful looking for of judgment; whatever experience he might previously have had of the divine goodness, he had now reached a point where that experience utterly forsook him; nothing that he felt within, nor any thing that he saw without him, could warrant him to expect either a remission or a mitigation of the penalty which he had incurred; and whether the nature of that penalty had been fully or but partially revealed to him, he must have been waiting, in trembling anxiety, the first manifestation of the divine presence, as the moment when his sentence, whatever it implied, was to be executed even unto the uttermost. I state this, not for the purpose of palliating his offence, in conceiving so dishonourably of God as to suppose, that he could hide himself from his presence, but for the purpose of showing, that if it was no excuse even in his case, how unspeakably aggravated the guilt of sinners is now, in endeavouring to withdraw themselves to a distance from God, while he advances to meet them, with the gracious offer of a free and unqualified forgiveness. The voice of Jehovah was to Adam an intimation only of displeasure—the Gospel brings to his posterity glad tidings of great joy; he was summoned from his hiding place to reckoning and

to judgment—they are allured from theirs by the covenant of reconciliation; the former had nothing to hope for in meeting with God—the latter are assured, on the faithfulness of the divine declaration, that they have nothing to fear, if they will only meet him on the ground of the Redeemer's righteousness. And why, then, should they be so reluctant to forsake their refuge of lies? why cleave to a hiding place, against which the fierce anger of the Lord must one day go forth to burn up and to consume? That sinners should be unwilling to entertain serious thoughts of the presence and perfections of God, and afraid to dwell on the prospect of meeting him in judgment, is the natural effect of the consciousness of having offended him; and if no hope of forgiveness had been held out, it is impossible to conceive that they would ever have cherished any other sentiments towards him. But how lamentable to think, that the very truth which announces a full remission, should to so many be offensive and distasteful; and that the view of the divine character which is presented in the Gospel, and which is both fitted and designed to remove all their suspicion and dislike, should serve only to call into activity the enmity of the carnal mind! That it does so, is in many cases too obvious to be disputed; and there is reason to fear that in many more this enmity is rather concealed than subdued: for it is

quite possible that the very ordinances in which the believer holds communion with God, and realizes the presence of a reconciled Father, may be employed by others, merely to quiet the apprehension that arises from the consciousness of habitually living at a distance from him; the sinner may at no time be farther from God, than at the very instant that he appears externally to be approaching him; and in making such an approach, he may be only seeking to conceal himself from the divine inspection, amidst the forms and decencies of a religious profession. To the truth of this representation many a believer will bear testimony, when he compares the formality with which he once engaged in religious exercises, with the peace and security which he now experiences in drawing near to God; and it will never cease to be the subject of his admiration and gratitude, that the truth which he formerly disliked has become the source of all his consolation, and that a sense of guilt, which at one time only awakened his enmity to God, and drove him to a greater distance from the divine presence, has constrained him to flee for refuge to the hope set before him in the Gospel, and to seek his chief happiness in the favour and fellowship of his Maker.

SERMON II.

THE UNGODLINESS OF WORLDLY PURSUITS.

ISAIAH X. 13.

By the strength of my hand I have done it, and by my wisdom, for I am prudent.

On comparing the passage from which our text is taken with the 36th and 37th chapters of this book, or with the 18th and 19th chapters of 2d Kings, we can hardly fail to conclude that the person here alluded to was Sennacherib, King of Assyria; and that the prediction recorded in these verses was fulfilled in the events that took place between the fourteenth and eighteenth year of Hezekiah, the king of Judah, or nearly thirty years after the prophet had uttered it. Respecting Sennacherib, we learn from the passages referred to, that he was the son of Shalmanezer, the former king of Assyria, by whom the ten tribes that constituted the kingdom of Israel, had been carried into captivity about seven years before; that on succeeding to the throne of his father, he immediately undertook an expedition against Judah, and was so far successful as to take possession of her fenced cities; and that he was prevented

from advancing upon Jerusalem itself, only by an agreement on the part of Hezekiah, to pay him three hundred talents of silver, and thirty talents of gold. We farther learn of him, that in open defiance of this treaty, he soon after renewed his invasion of the kingdom of Judah; that, as formerly, he again took possession of her fenced cities; and that, after encountering the king of Ethiopia, who had followed him into Judea, and overthrowing him with a great slaughter, as had been predicted by the prophet Isaiah, he directed his march towards Jerusalem, with the full determination of utterly destroying it, when he was overtaken by that terrible disaster in which the Angel of the Lord went forth, and slew of his army, in one night, an hundred and fourscore and five thousand men. It was at the commencement of this last expedition, and a short time before his utter overthrow, that he sent to the king of Judah those blasphemous and threatening messages which have been recorded by the inspired historian, and from which, partly, we are led to infer, that he is the person alluded to in the words of the text. "Beware," said he, addressing himself by his messengers to the people of Jerusalem, "beware lest Hezekiah persuade you, saying, The Lord will deliver us, Hath any of the gods of the nations delivered his land out of the hand of the king of Assyria? Where are the gods of Hamath and Arphad? Where are the gods of Sepharvaim? and have they delivered Samaria

out of my hand?" "Who are they among all the gods of these lands, that have delivered their land out of my hand, that the Lord should deliver Jerusalem out of my hand?" "Let not thy God," said he in his subsequent letter to Hezekiah himself, "let not thy God, in whom thou trustest, deceive thee, saying, Jerusalem shall not be given into the hand of the king of Assyria." The striking coincidence between the words now quoted, and the language which is prophetically put into the mouth of the king of Assyria, in the passage before us, leaves scarcely any room to doubt that Sennacherib is the person here spoken of; and nobody can fail to see how forcibly, and how faithfully his character is delineated in the words of the text.

But the history of the same individual is equally accordant with what is stated in the context, and in a preceding chapter, respecting the king of Assyria receiving a commission to execute the divine purposes in the chastisement of Judah. In the 8th chapter, the prophet, warning his countrymen of the fatal consequences of forming an alliance with a heathen prince, thus foretells the invasion of Judah. "And he shall pass through Judah; he shall overflow and go over, he shall reach even to the neck, and the stretching out of his wings shall fill the breadth of thy land, O Immanuel;"—a prediction which was strikingly fulfilled by the expedition of Sennacherib, when,

after taking possession of the fenced cities of Judah, he advanced almost to the very gates of Jerusalem; and when it was most emphatically true, that he had "overflowed, and gone over, and reached even to the neck." So far, then, he was an instrument, though an unconscious one, in accomplishing the divine purposes; and as such he is here denominated the rod of God's anger, the staff of his indignation. Inasmuch, however, as it was not in his heart to execute these purposes, but to gratify his own wicked and lawless ambition, by destroying and cutting off nations not a few, he was to be dealt with, not as a servant of the most high, but as a daring and presumptuous blasphemer; and the prophet accordingly predicts his final overthrow in the expressive language of the 12th verse, and assigns the reason of that overthrow in the words of the text. "Wherefore it shall come to pass, that when the Lord hath performed his whole work upon Mount Zion and on Jerusalem, I will punish the fruit of the stout heart of the king of Assyria, and the glory of his high looks. For he saith, By the strength of my hand I have done it; and by my wisdom, for I am prudent."

Such are the grounds on which we assume that Sennacherib is the person here spoken of; and we have adverted to his history and character, as necessary to be kept in view, if we would see the full force and import of the language in the text,

as originally employed. In his mouth, that language was not merely a general expression of unsubdued pride and successful ambition. It must be identified with the blasphemous and threatening letters which he addressed to the king of Judah, and to which we have already referred; and it consequently implied on his part, a direct denial of the divine supremacy,—a deliberate disavowal of his dependance on God,—a daring and most contemptuous defiance of the power of the Almighty. The sentiment in the text then will probably be regarded as an extreme case of impiety, to which no parallel is now to be found; for we are persuaded that there is scarcely an individual, among such as have been accustomed to hear of God as he is revealed in Scripture, however little they may have been affected by that revelation, to whom the avowal of such a sentiment would not be utterly revolting; and the subject may appear, therefore, to admit of no other use or application, than merely to be contemplated as a melancholy example of the length to which the ignorance and atheism of the human mind may go. I fear, however, that it does admit of a far more extended application; and that the very sentiment which appears so revolting, though neither so distinctly expressed, nor accompanied with so many palpable aggravations as in the case of Sennacherib, is nevertheless substantially held by many. It cannot, I think, be

disputed, that the character of an individual is not always to be estimated by what he professedly avows;—that multitudes are to be found acting on principles which they have never distinctly acknowledged even to themselves;—and that many a sentiment is secretly entertained, which the man who holds them would not venture to embody in language: and it will not be difficult to show, that one of these is just the sentiment in the text.

In proof of this remark, then, let us only reflect for a moment on the total forgetfulness of God, and the unwillingness to recognise his power and presence, with which, it is undeniable, that objects of human interest and ambition are frequently prosecuted and enjoyed. They who do so forget God, and who enjoy the comforts which his bounty has dispensed without acknowledging the hand from which they come, would not perhaps allege in so many words, that they are independent of their Creator, or that a divine power has had no share in bringing about the success with which their skill and their enterprise have been rewarded. But if they do habitually shut their eyes to his agency, and exclude him from their thoughts; if their professed acknowledgment of that agency carries not with it the homage of conscious dependance, and heart-felt gratitude; or, if they feel as if the habitual recognition of the Almighty were an encumbrance

that fetters them in their enjoyment of those objects on which their affections have been placed;—then, in the sight of him who reads the language of the heart, who interprets with infallible certainty every one of its emotions, and whose judgment of the real character is formed from a most intimate and unerring knowledge, of the feelings and affections of the inner man, they are virtually disowning his authority, and disavowing their dependance on his power. Nor can it be disputed that such, in fact, is the condition and character of every unregenerate man; for though sinners may contrive so to conceive of God, as that they can bear to think and speak of him without any very painful apprehensions, —though they may, in imagination, divest his character of every attribute which they would be afraid to contemplate, and clothe it with such an indiscriminate mercy as would look with indulgence on every gratification which they think reasonable or lawful—and though, in this way, they may succeed in persuading themselves, that they have his permission for enjoying their favourite pleasures or pursuits to the full extent of their wishes; yet there is in all this no more recognition of the power and supremacy of the one only living and true God, than if they ascribed these enjoyments to chance, or to any other imaginary and unintelligible principle. And, in point of fact, it will be found, that even

with this qualified view of his character, God is not the object of their habitual recognition; that when they do frame to themselves the idea of such a being, it is rather with the view of making their escape from certain unwelcome reflections that will sometimes intrude, than from any pleasure or satisfaction which they feel in recognising his presence, and referring their success to his power; that, after conceiving of him as altogether what they would have him to be, even then they have no desire to retain him in their knowledge, unless when compelled to have recourse to one view of his character, in order to shut out another that is still more alarming and unwelcome; that they are thus prosecuting their various schemes of happiness, and enjoying the fruits of their ingenuity and labour, just as if they were under no obligation to acknowledge his power, or to consult his will; and that, however revolting, therefore, the language of the text might be to them, they are in reality holding the sentiment, "by the strength of my hand I have done it, and by my wisdom, for I am prudent."

In farther illustration of these remarks, let us dwell for a little on the spirit with which worldly men engage in the pursuit of their favourite objects, the temper and disposition of mind with which they encounter disappointment, and the kind of happiness which they derive from the success of their enterprises. Supposing, then, that

their object is the accumulation of wealth, or the acquisition of such a portion of the good things of this life as they may have conceived to be necessary for their comfort and well-being; and what, I would ask, is the principle on which they set about the pursuit and the attainment of that object? Until they have attained it, nothing is more obvious than that it constitutes their all, and that, on the success of the schemes which they have formed for securing it, they have actually staked their happiness; for whatever may be their ulterior views and plans, or whatever other sources of gratification they may promise to themselves, beyond the mere acquisition of any given amount of worldly possessions, these possessions must, in their estimation, be the well-spring of every other enjoyment; and on these, therefore, in the first instance, the whole strength and energy of their souls must be expended. It is equally obvious, too, that in forming their scheme of operations, and reckoning up the various encouragements by which they are animated to exertion, and think themselves entitled to look for success, they cannot, without the most daring presumption, calculate upon any countenance or aid from the providence of God: for even supposing, what is the very utmost we can suppose of such as are still alienated from their Maker, that they have resolved, as soon as they shall have secured the worldly portion on which their hearts are set to

devote the leisure that will then be left them, to the serious consideration of their spiritual concerns; nothing but the hardihood of impiety would venture, on the ground of such a resolution, to seek or expect the blessing of God on their worldly pursuits. For what would such an expectation really amount to? Would it not be to say, that God may sanction their deliberate preference of the world to himself—that he may voluntarily relinquish, at least for a time, his inalienable right to the heart and affections of his intelligent creatures—that he can consent to the calumny against his character and perfections which would represent perishing things as a more substantial portion to them than the enjoyment of himself,—and that he may thus contradict his own solemn declaration, that his favour is life, and that his loving kindness is better than life? There is reason, indeed, to believe, that, in a great majority of cases, worldly plans are laid, and worldly pursuits engaged in, without any such resolution as I have now referred to respecting spiritual things being ever seriously formed. But even when these purposes are entertained, it is evident that they do not affect the principle of ungodliness which characterises all their undertakings; and it is impossible, therefore, in the nature of things, that there can be, with unregenerate men, any distinct recognition of the divine supremacy in the determination of the events that befal them, or any

acknowledgment of his bounty in the successful issue of their schemes. The ardour with which they prosecute these is virtually a declaration that they are determined to be happy independently of God; the firmness and perseverance with which they struggle with adversity, and labour to retrieve their losses, are so many attempts to dispute with him the determination of events, and to wrest from his hand the government of the universe; and when they have been successful almost or altogether to the extent of their expectations,—when they have little more to toil for or to think of, but how their accumulated wealth may be made to minister in the greatest variety of ways to their gratification,—when they have leisure to take a survey of the skill and dexterity with which they formed and executed their plans,—and when they contrast the success that has rewarded them with the failure and disappointment that have befallen others in similar circumstances,—the principle which lies at the foundation of all their enjoyments, and gives zest to every other gratification, is substantially that which is expressed in our text, "by the strength of my hand I have done it, and by my wisdom, for I am prudent."

Such is obviously the principle on which the schemes of worldly men must be formed, and the fruits of these schemes enjoyed; and I apprehend the observations now submitted are too much in accordance with the testimony of experience

and observation, to leave any room for their being doubted or disputed. It is not, however, to those only who place their chief good in a given portion of this world's wealth, in the acquisition of its gains, or the accumulation of its comforts, that these observations are applicable. They will be found to hold equally true in the case of many who aim at nobler objects, and expend their strength in more dignified pursuits ;—even those who can find in the exercise of high intellectual endowments a gratification which mere worldly wealth never could furnish,—or see, in the cultivation of those qualities of the heart, and those virtues of the life which command the esteem of their fellow men, a possession which they would not exchange for all that wealth could purchase ; but who have not yet acquired any capacity for the purer and more permanent happiness of a growing conformity to the divine image in this world, and the enjoyment of eternal communion with God in the world to come. That such men are seeking to draw their pleasures from a far more elevated source than any thing that the mere worldling or sensualist ever dreamed of, we readily admit ; nor do we deny, that when the intellectual man makes a successful excursion into the regions of profound and philosophical research, or when the benevolent man has compassed some scheme of philanthropy, whereby he is to better the condition of his fellow creatures around him, both

have reaped enjoyments, which the largest accession to worldly wealth never did, and never can bestow upon its votaries. But, elevated as such pursuits may be, and profound as is the homage of respect which the world is called upon, and readily consents to pay to them; yet, wherever they constitute the only portion that the soul seeks after, and occupy that place in the affections which God claims as his own, they bear upon them the same impress of ungodliness which characterises the schemes of worldly aggrandizement, and may ultimately be traced to the very same principle. The man who has been endowed with capacities of mind that elevate him above the great bulk of his fellow men, and fit him for grappling with those sublime subjects of speculation and research which lie beyond the reach of inferior minds, may look even with loathing on those groveling pursuits among which others are contented to dwell. But till the sublimest of all truths, that "God was in Christ, reconciling the world unto himself, not imputing unto men their trespasses," has reached his understanding and affected his heart, he can have no right apprehension of the divine nature, nor any reverential recognition of God's presiding agency. His own intellect is in fact the god of his idolatry, for which he claims the homage of the world's admiration; and when, from the elevation to which he has risen, he surveys the field of discovery in which

he has long been luxuriating, and contemplates the limited range of intellectual vision to which multitudes around him have been all their lifetime confined, the feeling that arises in his mind will be nearly allied to the sentiment expressed in the text. The same remark is applicable also to the man who, by the benevolence of his character, the irreproachable regularity of his life, and the integrity that has marked the whole of his intercourse with the world, has secured the world's respect and esteem, and who builds with confidence on his many virtues as a sure foundation of hope for the future; for when such a man contrasts his own character with that of multitudes around him, it will be with feelings of self-complacency and satisfaction that he contemplates the contrast, and in the spirit of self-gratulation that he surveys the more degrading vices which, in the strength of his own virtuous principle, he has successfully resisted. With both, therefore, self has, in reality, taken the place of God,—the intellectual endowments of the one and the moral qualities of the other constitute their alone satisfying portion,—the exercise of these has no reference to the presence and supremacy of God as he is revealed in the gospel,—and whatever, therefore, may be the extent of their gratifications, the language of their hearts respecting them is, "by the strength of my hand have I done it, and by my wisdom, for I am prudent."

It would be easy, were it necessary, to pursue these remarks to a much greater length, and by entering on the detail of particular cases, to show how the principle in the text pervades all the business and the pleasures of an unregenerate world. Such a detail, however, I do not conceive to be necessary, in the way either of proof or of illustration; for nothing, I apprehend, is more obvious in itself, or more accordant with the experience of every man, who has made his escape from a state of enmity against God, than that the sentiment here expressed is the sentiment of all who are in a state of alienation from their Maker. The principle, indeed, is essentially an atheistical one, inasmuch as it strikes at the sovereignty, and consequently at the very existence of the Godhead: and multitudes, I am aware, even of those who are living without God and without hope in the world, would be ready to repel with indignation a direct charge of atheism. Were the question directly proposed to them, I do not doubt that they would without hesitation acknowledge the existence and the supremacy of God; that they would avow their belief in him as the Creator of all things, and ascribe to his almighty and unceasing agency the continual preservation and government of the universe; and by such a confession they would no doubt suppose that they had refuted every such charge. But what avails a professed acknowledgment like this, if they are

habitually excluding him from their thoughts, and actually seeking to be happy independently of his blessing? Is not this, in fact, retaining the essence of atheism, at the very moment that they are disavowing the name; and if the testimonies to the divine existence are so numerous and irresistible, that they have not been able to bring themselves deliberately to conclude that there is no God; do not these very convictions, or rather I should say, suspicions of his existence, instead of palliating the charge, serve only to aggravate the guilt of labouring to forget him, and impart to their atheism a character of deeper and darker malignity? Nor will it avail them any thing more, that they have formed to themselves such an idea of his character as accords best with their wishes and their inclinations, and that in this light they do frequently recognise his presence and power. To conceive of him in any other way than as he has revealed himself, is in reality the same as habitually to shut him out of the thoughts—nay, it will be found, that it is only a subterfuge under which the conscience contrives more easily, and with fewer misgivings, to reconcile itself to a forgetfulness of God. In either case, therefore, there is all the guilt of atheism; there is a secret desire either that God did not exist, or that he were different from what he has revealed himself in his word; there is the sentiment which the Psalmist ascribes to the fool, who says

in his heart "No God!" or I would there were no God; and what can a feeble and dependent creature do more towards excluding the divine agency from the world, than wishing that no such agency were in operation? But is not this the true interpretation of every man's sentiments, who is conscious that a vivid impression of God's presence, in all the purity and holiness with which the Bible has invested his character, would be a formidable obstacle in the prosecution of many a scheme, and prove a depressing weight to him in executing many an enterprise; who feels that the habitual recognition of that presence would wither the fairest of his prospects, and mar the sweetest of his pleasures; and who endeavours, therefore, either to modify the divine character, so as to render it less offensive to him, or to make it as little as possible the subject of solemn and serious reflection? For what would be the result, if every intelligent creature in the universe acted upon the same principle? Would it not amount to a universal confederacy against the very existence of God? Would it not be excluding him from that portion of his works, where he has especially sought to be enthroned in absolute supremacy—even the heart, and understanding, and affections of his intelligent creatures? And would it not imply on their part the horrid wish, that the Almighty would relinquish the sovereignty of this world, retire beyond the limits

of created things, and withdraw from the reach of human thought, and the possibility of human recognition?

Such, then, is the real import of the sentiment in our text, wherever it is entertained, and habitually acted upon; and such the true character of the unsubdued enmity of the carnal mind against God. The sentiment, indeed, is as foolish with regard to the sinner, as it is impious with respect to the Almighty; for as well might it be supposed that the movements of the material universe would remain undisturbed, though the principle that is essential to its stability were annihilated, as that an intelligent and moral creature could be permanently blessed, if released from the law of dependance on his Creator. And yet to this state of disorder and ruin every unrenewed sinner is actually seeking to be abandoned. How profound then should be the gratitude of the believer, that he has been delivered from the dominion of his own infatuated inclinations! He, too, was once alienated from the life of God, through the ignorance that was in him. In his eye there was nothing in the divine character but what was formidable and repulsive; and like others, he sought to withdraw himself from the painful consciousness of the divine presence, as a state of mind and feeling in which he could neither prosecute his worldly schemes, nor enjoy the fruits of his success. But when his eyes were open-

ed to the character of God as manifested in Jesus Christ; when he began to see and conceive aright of the compassion and forbearance with which his waywardness had been treated, and his disobedience endured; and when he perceived that, without compromising any one principle of his law, or laying aside any one attribute of his nature, God was presenting himself in a light fitted to remove all the dread and dislike of the guilty, and therefore suspicious heart; from that moment he felt the most powerful attraction towards the very being from whom he formerly sought to make his escape; and that, too, at the very instant that he had a more overwhelming view of the number and magnitude of his offences than they had ever before presented to him. It is thus that the enmity of the human heart is in every instance ultimately subdued. The consequence of that enmity is a disinclination to approach God, and an unwillingness to hold with him any intimate converse: and this unwillingness is counteracted by the influence of the Holy Spirit, opening his eyes to the manifestation of the divine character in the gospel, wherein it is clothed with all the attractions of love, compassion, and mercy. The first blessed fruits, therefore, which the sinner reaps from believing the glad tidings of the gospel, is deliverance from the pressure of that undefined dread, which never failed to lie heavy upon his soul, as often as he

contemplated the purity of God, and the prospect of hereafter meeting him in the character of a judge; and were he required shortly to state the nature of the change which he has undergone, in consequence of having understood and believed the divine testimony concerning Christ, there is no way perhaps in which he could give so concise and comprehensive an account of that change, as just to state how he formerly felt, and how he now feels with regard to God; that whereas he once saw it to be essential to his peace, either to forget God altogether, or to regard him as less holy, and pure, and just than the Scriptures represent him to be, he now sees that the absolute perfection of God is the very ground of his security; that the more vividly he can realize the divine presence, the more entirely does he feel relieved from anxiety and fear about the result of all his undertakings; and that a conscious nearness to God as his reconciled Father in Christ, and a constant sense of dependance on him, is essential to the permanency of his comfort. To such a man, therefore, the sentiment in our text must be utterly revolting; and so long as he lives in the recollection, and under the influence of the truth, he can never on any occasion deliberately adopt it. But though, from the moment that he was turned from darkness to light, and was persuaded that, as a sinner, there was no hope for him but in the free grace

of the gospel, his whole system of pride and self-confidence was overthrown; yet he will recollect that his unwillingness to accept salvation as altogether of free grace, proceeded from the very principle which we have now been examining; and he will have learned from experience that he is still at times but too ready to admit it, just as he is still prone to unbelief, of which it is the offspring. It may not therefore be an unprofitable exercise, even for the believer to contemplate the subject in the light in which we have endeavoured to place it. It is at once the duty and the privilege of the Christian to walk with God, to realize the divine presence in all his pursuits, and to recognise a divine agency in the result of all his schemes; and it is an abandonment of both, therefore, to say, or to feel, with regard to any achievement, "by the strength of my hand I have done it, and by my wisdom, for I am prudent."

SERMON III.

THE TENDENCY OF MORAL EVIL TO PERPETUATE ITSELF.

1 KINGS xiv. 16.

And he shall give Israel up because of the sins of Jeroboam, who did sin, and who made Israel to sin.

THE name of the individual here spoken of must be familiar to every one who is at all conversant with the Old Testament scriptures, as occurring more frequently than it would be easy, perhaps, to reckon up, and almost always in connexion with some such declaration as that in the text. We might conclude, therefore, from the simple circumstance of his being referred to so often and in such terms, that there is something in the history of that individual especially deserving our most serious consideration; for assuredly it could be on no slight grounds, and for no unimportant purpose, that the Holy Spirit directed the sacred historian to advert so frequently to the character of the same person, as emphatically expressive of what is most offensive in the sight of God; and we have only to examine the leading facts in the history itself, to be convinced, that it is in reality

designed, as well as calculated, to convey the most interesting and important instruction.

In the 11th chapter of this same book we are informed, that Jeroboam, the son of Nebat, an Ephrathite, was a servant to Solomon the king of Israel, and that, in consequence of his fidelity and courage, he was promoted by his master to a place of honour and responsibility, even to be ruler over the tribes of Ephraim and Manasseh. While in this situation, a communication was made to him by Ahijah the prophet, in the name of the Lord, intimating to him that he was one day to be king over ten of the tribes of Israel, which, in consequence of the apostacy of Solomon, were to be wrested from the house of David; and this intimation was accompanied also with the assurance, that "if he would hearken unto all that the Lord commanded him, and would walk in his ways, and do what was right in his sight, and keep his statutes and his commandments, as David had done; then God would be with him, and build him a sure house, as he had built for David, and would give unto him the kingdom of Israel." Whether Jeroboam, in opposition to the express declaration of the prophet, that the kingdom was not to be his during the life of Solomon, aspired to the immediate possession of the throne, and proceeded to overt acts of treason, as seems to be intimated by the statement, that he lifted up his hand against Solomon; or whether the latter, in spite of the re-

peated intimations which he had received of the approaching dishonour and downfal of his house, had conceived the vain and presumptuous idea of defeating the revealed counsels of God; so it was "that Solomon sought to kill Jeroboam; and Jeroboam arose and fled into Egypt, and was in Egypt until the death of Solomon." Immediately on receiving intelligence of this event, accompanied, it would appear, with an expression of the good will which his countryman cherished towards him, Jeroboam returned from his exile; and when the tribes of Israel assembled at Shechem, formally to recognise the title, and acknowledge the authority of Rehoboam as their sovereign, he appeared at the head of those who remonstrated with the young king on the subject of the heavy burdens imposed upon them by his father Solomon, and urged the removal of these burdens, as the only condition on which they would pledge to him their allegiance and submission. The answer which Rehoboam returned to this remonstrance it is hardly necessary to state. Despising the prudent advice of the wiser and more experienced of his father's counsellors, and listening to the more grateful suggestions of his youthful associates, whose flattery ministered to the strength of his pride, and served to inflame that love of power by which he was already elated, he shut his eyes to the palpable symptoms of revolt that appeared among his people, and the ruinous consequences

that would inevitably follow an ungracious answer; and, in a tone of haughty defiance, thus replied: "My father made your yoke heavy, and I will add to your yoke; my father chastised you with whips, but I will chastise you with scorpions." The allegiance of ten of the tribes of Israel to the house of David was thus dissolved by a single sentence; the dissatisfaction that had begun to be felt during the former reign now passed into open rebellion; the hearts of the people were, by that one act, utterly and irrecoverably alienated from the young king; and having called Jeroboam to the congregation, they unanimously proclaimed him king over all Israel; "nor was there any that followed the house of David but the tribe of Judah only."

Such was the train of circumstances that brought about the fulfilment of the word of the Lord spoken by the mouth of the prophet Ahijah; and though there is reason to suspect that, with regard to the parties concerned in this memorable revolt, there were few sanctified motives on either side,—though it is evident that the people were influenced, more by the wish to be relieved of their temporal burdens, than a desire to put down the idolatrous practices which had crept in under the sanction of their former king,—and though it is more than probable that Jeroboam himself might have employed artifice to gain the hearts of the people, and facilitate his

elevation to the throne; yet we have seen nothing in his conduct, previous to the period of which we are now speaking, that could have assigned to him that guilty pre-eminence which we find him holding in the history of the kings of Israel. The sin, then, with which he was especially chargeable, and which is so frequently referred to, as expressive of all that was most aggravated in the delinquencies of his successors, must have taken place subsequently to his advancement to the kingdom; and indeed it was too flagrant in itself, and too ruinous in its consequences, to leave us in any doubt as to what it was in his character that the sacred historian so often alludes to. When the prophet foretold to him that he was to be elevated to the throne of Israel, the prediction, as we have already seen, was accompanied with a promise, that "if he would hearken to the voice of the Lord, and walk in his ways, and do that which was right in his sight, and keep his statutes and his commandments, he would be with him, and build him a sure house, as he had built for David;" and this promise, therefore, necessarily implied, that disobedience would prove as calamitous as he was assured his obedience would be prosperous. But though the first part of this prediction was accomplished to the full extent of what the prophet foretold, and though Jeroboam thereby received a pledge for the due fulfilment of all that remained; yet the very first public act of his

reign that has been recorded was one of daring contempt for the authority, and open defiance of the power of God—an act in which he virtually declared, that he did not credit the veracity of the divine promise, and could not rely with any security on its accomplishment; that for the maintenance of his authority, and the permanency of his kingdom, he would look to the wisdom of his own counsel, and the strength of his own arm; and that, not only without the aid of the divine direction, but even in despite of the divine displeasure, he would adopt a line of policy that would strengthen his influence, and give stability to his throne. "Jeroboam said in his heart, now shall the kingdom return to the house of David: If this people go up to do sacrifice in the house of the Lord at Jerusalem, then shall the heart of this people turn again unto their lord, even unto Rehoboam, king of Judah, and they shall kill me, and go again to Rehoboam, king of Judah. Whereupon the king took counsel, and made two calves of gold, and said unto them, It is too much for you to go up to Jerusalem: behold thy gods, O Israel, which brought thee up out of the land of Egypt." The consequence that he contemplated, should Israel be permitted to go up to Jerusalem to worship, might no doubt appear to him a very probable event; nor might he be able, perhaps, to discover in what way the government was to be secured to him, if that permission

was granted. But as little could he have foreseen that he was to be raised to the throne at first, with so few efforts on his part, and so much unanimity on the part of the people; while the revolution that placed him there bore testimony to the faithfulness of the divine promise, the manner in which that revolution was brought about demonstrated the facility with which the divine purposes can be executed; the hand of God had been so visibly put forth in his exaltation to power, that it seems difficult to conceive how one suspicion of its permanency could for a moment gain admittance to his mind; and if any perplexity did arise, it might at least have been expected, that, in such an emergency, he would have been as ready to seek direction from the prophet who had foretold his elevation, as he was at a future period, when family affliction drove him to ask counsel at the hand of the man of God. His conduct, therefore, was an impious and daring contempt of the divine authority, devoid of every palliating circumstance, and aggravated by every consideration that could augment the guilt of his ingratitude and unbelief; for, while the very preservation of his life was a memorial of the vanity of every attempt to defeat the counsels of heaven, and while the power with which he had been invested bore witness to the immutability of the divine purposes, he set himself to counteract the expressly revealed designs of the

most high, and with an infatuation as hopeless as it was wicked, deliberately defied the omnipotence, and openly impeached the veracity of God.

It thus appears that the complicated guilt which continued to accumulate upon Jeroboam during a reign of two and twenty years, may be traced to his having, at the commencement of that reign, treated the word of God as unworthy of credit; and his history therefore is, even in this respect, full of the most important instruction, as furnishing a striking illustration of the truth, that while unbelief is itself the most heinous offence against the majesty of God with which a creature can be chargeable, it is at the same time the source of every other atrocious crime, and that which gives peculiar malignity to every act of rebellion against the divine government. But the point to which I would at present especially solicit your attention, as that which is more immediately referred to in the words of the text, is the effect which Jeroboam's sin produced upon others, and the incalculable extent of the ruin in which countless multitudes were thereby involved. From the moment that he set up his golden images, the one in Bethel and the other in Dan, the nation of Israel became a nation of idolaters; the revolt of the ten tribes from the house of David, was a revolt also from the government and worship of the true God; the policy which Jeroboam adopted to perpetuate the separation between Israel and

Judah, perpetuated also the separation of the former from the divine favour; that policy was successively pursued without one exception, and in many cases with circumstances of aggravated impiety by all the monarchs that came after him; and the mischievous effect of the sin whereby he sought to establish his power, may be traced in one unbroken accumulation of guilt and misery, from the day of his exaltation to the throne, till the utter overthrow of the kingdom, and final captivity of the children of Israel. It is no doubt true, that there was manifested on the part of the people as much readiness to adopt the idolatrous system, as there was on the part of Jeroboam to propose it; nor would it have been competent for them to plead his authority and example in justification of their apostacy, or as a reason why they should be exempted from participating in the calamities with which they were assured, by a solemn enactment of divine legislation, such apostacy must necessarily be visited. They knew that by assenting to the proposal of the king, they were violating the first and great fundamental condition in that covenant on which their tenure of the land of Canaan was to depend; they could not have forgotten, that idolatry was the true cause of the extravagant expenditure of the former reign, and the origin therefore of all the grievances on account of which they had transferred their allegiance from the house of David

to that of Jeroboam; and they could not be ignorant that the instant they bowed down before the images in Dan and Bethel, they forfeited their right to the inheritance of their fathers, and deliberately relinquished the security of another day's possession. But though all this is true, and though it is all distinctly recognised in the text, inasmuch as their participation in the sins of Jeroboam is assigned as the reason why the Lord declared that he would give Israel up; yet the guilt of Jeroboam himself was not thereby diminished. His infidelity and unsanctified lust of power was the immediate cause of that apostacy, which, from the commencement of his reign, continued to gather strength, and finally became irrecoverable; at every step of the progressive debasement of Israel, his sin stands out prominently to view, as the malignant principle that was working moral desolation and temporal ruin among the people; during a period of two hundred and fifty years, every new accumulation of crime and calamity threw additional light on the extent and magnitude of the sin whereby he made Israel to sin; and the ruin that finally overtook them, when they were carried into captivity, and when their name as a nation was blotted out, stands inseparably connected with the impious proclamation which he issued: "Behold thy gods, O Israel, which brought thee up out of the land of Egypt." There

is nothing fanciful in the connexion which we have thus traced, between the personal delinquency of Jeroboam, and the growing degeneracy of his subjects. To every reflecting mind, it must appear a melancholy and most alarming reality, that he was personally implicated in all the consequences of his first deliberate departure from the commandments of God; and it is evident, from the whole tenour of his history, that the Holy Spirit designed thereby to inculcate this solemn truth. In the words of our text, which were addressed to the wife of Jeroboam, by the same prophet who foretold her husband's elevation to the throne, the ruinous consequences of his sin are expressly predicted; to that sin a continual reference is made, in the subsequent history of the kings that succeeded him; and in the passage that records the captivity of Israel, where God has vouchsafed to detail the grounds of his procedure, and to vindicate, as it were, his rejection of the people whom he had once chosen for his own, it is expressly assigned as the bitter source of all their calamities. "And the Lord rejected all the seed of Israel, and afflicted them, and delivered them into the hand of spoilers, until he had cast them out of his sight. For he rent Israel from the house of David: and they made Jeroboam the son of Nebat king: and Jeroboam drove Israel from following the Lord, and made them sin a great sin. For the children

of Israel walked in all the sins of Jeroboam which he did; they departed not from them." And thus did the guilty ambition of a single individual not only involve a nation in a participation of his guilt, but entail a moral disease on many a succeeding generation—putting into operation a principle of evil which gathered strength and malignant energy by the lapse of ages—and giving rise to a complication of crime, and a continued accumulation of suffering, which omniscience alone can fully estimate or understand.

I doubt not it will readily occur, that the principle by which the sin of Jeroboam was thus perpetuated, is in reality a principle of our apostate nature, that must ever be in active operation; and that the subject of these remarks, therefore, admits of a very obvious, as well as a very extended application. There were, it is true, many peculiar circumstances in his case which served to render his sin more flagrant, and its consequences more palpable, than it is possible they can be with a great proportion of mankind; and in these respects, therefore, no parallel can be drawn between his character and that of any individual in ordinary circumstances. The place which he occupied was one of power and extended influence; the practice which he introduced, from the moment that it was acquiesced in, became a national delinquency, involving thousands in its guilt; the

covenant that was thereby violated was a covenant, on the stability of which depended the very existence of Israel as a nation; and the judgments with which their sin was visited were temporal judgments, and therefore open to the inspection of the world. But, after excluding or making allowance for all these peculiarities, enough still remains to exemplify the natural tendency of moral evil to extend and perpetuate its debasing influence, and enough to suggest to the sinner many a serious and alarming reflection. Though it might be utterly impossible for us to trace the guilt of any individual through all its remote consequences—though we might not be warranted directly to charge him with any definite portion of the sins of those whom he has been instrumental in corrupting—and though we might be altogether unable to estimate the extent to which he has contributed to the amount of abounding iniquity; yet to God, who is intimately acquainted with every possible combination of events, and can assign to every separate cause its precise share of the influence by which these events are brought about, every action of every individual must be perfectly known, both as it is in itself, and as it affects those who may be directly or indirectly subjected to its influence. And who does not perceive that his all-seeing eye may be tracing the consequences of a guilty deed, at the distance of ages from the moment at which it was committed,

and connecting the ruin of multitudes with an action which the perpetrator himself perhaps dismissed from his recollection, with as little concern as he did the worthless gratification that led to it? The man who, in the pride of his fancied intellectual superiority, awakens in the mind of another one serious doubt on the subject of divine truth, or he who, in the pursuit of ungodly pleasure, allures a fellow creature into a participation of his own profligacy, thereby opens a floodgate which Omnipotence alone can shut; and were a prophetic eye to take a survey of the future consequences of one such action, it might see there the commencement of a train of evils, as appalling in their nature, and as interminable in their duration, as those which Ahijah foresaw when he uttered the prediction in the text. The instant such a man has succeeded in effacing the religious impressions, or corrupting the moral principles of another, he has put a principle of evil in operation which it is utterly beyond his power to control; he has inflicted an injury which the wealth of worlds, if it were at his command, could not repair—and an injury too of which he can neither see the termination nor calculate the extent; the victim of his own artifice is prepared to perpetrate the same crimes, and to entail upon others the same ruin; and thus may the effects of his sin continue to be perpetuated and felt when he himself is forgotten, or when his memory lives only

in the book of that remembrance, where his guilt has been recorded in connexion with its consequences. To the truth of these remarks the experience of every day bears melancholy and decisive evidence; for who has not known them exemplified, and to a fearful extent too, even within the sphere of his own observation? Yet how little, how very little of these consequences can come under our notice, compared with what they really are, and must appear, therefore, in the sight of God; and how fearful must the judgment seat be to the man who is there to be reckoned with for unforgiven guilt like this,—who shall then be compelled to read the faithful record, not only of his personal offences, but of their pestilential effects,—who shall be made to see the full extent to which the withering influences of his crimes has affected the moral well-being of his fellow-men,—and shall be confronted with the multitudes, whose impenitence he was instrumental in sealing, and to whose ruin, therefore, he has in reality contributed!

Such is the first and most obvious application which we are naturally led to make of the subject before us; and so far that application is too palpable I apprehend to be disputed. That there is a tendency in moral evil to spread, and to perpetuate itself, is as much a matter of experience as it is the declaration of Scripture, nor can it in fact be otherwise among apostate and depraved crea-

tures; and it is equally undeniable that, in consequence of this very tendency, the guilt of one individual may go to aggravate that of multitudes with whom he never had any opportunity of being brought into contact. To what extent such an individual may be directly chargeable with the iniquity which he has thus contributed to augment, or on what principle he will be reckoned with when all the consequences of his crimes are laid open, and the connexion between these and the offences of others is distinctly traced, are questions which we presume not to determine. "The judge of all the earth will do that which is right." But that such a connexion does exist, and that it is recognised too by him who will render to every man according to his deeds, is most distinctly taught in the history before us; and when we represent this connexion as contributing to swell the amount of personal delinquency, we only state what the testimony of conscience will be found to confirm; for we do not hesitate to assert, that if the sinner is ever awakened to a sense of his guilt, one of the bitterest and the most agonizing of his reflections will be, that he has contributed to corrupt or to harden others, without the possibility of repairing the injury that he has done them.

But neither is the application of the subject to be confined to such as have, either by deliberate attempts, or the influence of a vicious example, succeeded in corrupting others, and have thus

given a new impulse as it were to the strength of prevailing iniquity. Upon the principle which is laid down in the text, and which we have now endeavoured to illustrate, it is evident that from every unholy action that is performed, and every unsanctified expression that is uttered, there must be going forth a corrupting and debasing influence; that though the effects of this influence may not be immediately perceived, it may, nevertheless, have left impressions that will never again be effaced; and that if it has once taken effect, no human wisdom can estimate or foretell the consequences. And if this principle be admitted, then where is the man, let his past life have been as free of flagrant transgressions, and the sphere of his influence as limited as it may, who will venture to allege that he has never contributed to the moral and spiritual injury of his fellow-men—that none have ever imbibed from him an unholy sentiment—or that none have been encouraged by his example to persevere in the ways of sin? So long as he is a stranger to the power of the gospel, there will be something in his character, which, in spite of all the decencies of an external profession, will indicate a spirit of hostility to vital godliness; and though the symptoms of this hostility may seldom or never be perceived by those with whom he holds only a slight or occasional intercourse; yet they will manifest themselves in a thousand ways to his more intimate associates,

and may be exercising an influence over them which, though unseen by others, and scarcely felt by themselves, will as effectually estrange them from divine things, as if they were exposed to an apparently stronger, and more dangerous temptation. The very tone and manner in which divine truth is spoken of may weaken the impression of reverence that was once felt for its authority—one expression of levity, or a single profane allusion, may lessen the abhorrence that was entertained for the deformity of sin—and a conversation, which to him might appear too trifling to be remembered, may have made a fearful inroad on the moral principles of others, and loosened the salutary restraints which conscience imposes on the sinful propensities of the heart. In all this, indeed, he may see nothing wherewith to upbraid himself; and while he is not chargeable with having deliberately attempted to draw others into the actual commission of gross and flagrant immoralities, he may flatter himself that he has never incurred the guilt of injuring the spiritual interests of any. Very different, however, is his character in the sight of God, and very different will it be in his own estimation, should he ever be awakened from his dream of self-security. He will then see that it is no light thing to have ministered to the delusion of a fellow-sinner, and contributed to strengthem him in his alienation from God; that the life, which he once thought so blameless,

has not only been unprofitable but positively mischievous; that every day which he spent in a state of estrangement from his Maker, was productive of injury to others as well as to himself; and that the amount of this injury is such as he cannot estimate, and never will be able to repair.

These, I think, are reflections which can hardly fail to occur to the Christian, on looking back to that period of his life when he was living without God and without hope in the world; and though he may never have made any deliberate effort to corrupt or mislead a fellow sinner, yet he will still have enough to lament on the retrospect of that period, and enough to remind him how unprofitable it was to himself, and how injurious it must have been to others. He knows that in all the intercourse which he then held with his fellow-men, he was as little inclined as he was qualified to attempt advancing their spiritual interests; and though it is but comparatively little of that intercourse that he can now remember, he cannot doubt that much of it was calculated to efface, rather than to strengthen, their impressions of divine things; and that the influence of many a sentiment and action which he has long ago forgotten, may yet be operating on the life and character of those with whom he associated. And while these reflections awaken feelings of the deepest humiliation and self-abasement, need I urge upon believers the powerful motive which they

suggest, to be active and diligent in labouring to counteract that principle of evil which is so fearfully prevalent, and which they themselves have been instrumental in strengthening? Were their own unaided efforts, indeed, the only agency that is to be looked for to give success to such an attempt, it would assuredly prove a very hopeless enterprise, as the very subject which we have been considering does abundantly testify; and they might be ready to resign themselves to the desponding reflection, that while every sinful action of their lives may have contributed to strengthen the opposition of others to the government of God, they will never be able to effect any thing in the way of disarming that opposition. They are not abandoned, however, to the feebleness of their own strength, nor left to dwell with unavailing complaints on their own helplessness. The Spirit of God has himself undertaken to counteract this malignant principle; their own deliverance from the dominion of a depraved heart is itself a proof that his agency is at work; and if sinners, in their unregenerate state, do mutually minister to one another's spiritual debasement, they are employed as instruments also in effecting one another's spiritual regeneration. And can believers reflect on the unsearchable wisdom, and the marvellous condescension of such an order of things, without feeling, and habitually acting under a sense of the obligations hereby laid on them, to labour for the

spiritual welfare of others? Though the infectious example of moral evil among creatures already depraved, is more than sufficient to resist the efforts, and counteract the influence even of the holiest of the children of God, yet the Spirit can impart to the latter a power and an energy before which that resistance will give way; the Christian is encouraged to believe, that through this divine influence he may carry with him a purifying, as he once did a corrupting influence among his brethren around him; opportunities are thus afforded him of redeeming the time that he misspent, and remedying, in some measure, the evils which he occasioned; and while the scriptures tell him of the retribution that awaits those who have not only sinned but also made others to sin, they tell him likewise that "they that be wise shall shine as the brightness of the firmament, and they that turn many to righteousness as the stars for ever and ever."

SERMON IV.

GOD MANIFEST IN THE FLESH.

2 CHRONICLES vi. 18.

But will God in very deed dwell with men on the earth!

WE are told of David, the king of Israel, that he had in his heart to build an house of rest for the ark of the covenant of the Lord, and had made ready for the building; but that God said unto him, "Thou shalt not build an house for my name; because thou hast been a man of war, and hast shed blood; but Solomon thy son, he shall build my house and my courts; for I have chosen him to be my son, and I will be his father." This declaration was made by David himself, in the presence of the congregation of Israel, and we find him, on the same occasion, and in the audience of all the people, thus addressing his son: "And thou Solomon, my son, know thou the God of thy father, and serve him with a perfect heart, and with a willing mind; for the Lord searcheth all hearts, and understandeth all the imaginations of the thoughts; if thou seek him,

he will be found of thee; but if thou forsake him, he will cast thee off for ever. Take heed now; for the Lord hath chosen thee to build an house for the sanctuary; be strong, and do it." With this charge, we are told David delivered to Solomon the pattern of the house of the Lord which had been communicated to himself by the spirit, "even all that the Lord had made him understand in writing by his hand upon him," and the execution of this work, agreeably to the divine pattern, we find detailed in the preceding chapters of this book.

At the moment then in which Solomon uttered the words of the text, he could look back on the full accomplishment of all the encouraging promises which had been held out to him by his father; and had to acknowledge the good hand of God, carrying him, without failure or disappointment, to the completion of a work which was not only in itself the most splendid that had ever been undertaken, but which, as the palace of the Lord God, and the final destination of the ark of the testimony, might be regarded as a pledge of the stability of David's house, and a solemn ratification of God's covenant with his people. Already had the work been finished according to the pattern which the Spirit himself had communicated to David; the tabernacle of the testimony, and the holy vessels had been transferred from the high place in Gibeon to the apartment allotted

to them in the temple ; the ark of the covenant of the Lord, which had hitherto gone from tent to tent, and from one tabernacle to another, had been brought up by the priests and Levites from the city of David, and with all conceivable pomp and solemnity deposited by them in the most holy place ; and " the house had been filled with a cloud, even the house of the Lord, so that the priests could not stand to minister by reason of the cloud ; for the glory of the Lord had filled the house of God." In these circumstances did the king of Israel present himself before the altar of the Lord, and kneeling down upon his knees before all the congregation of Israel, and spreading forth his hands toward heaven, he publicly gave thanks for all the goodness that had been made to pass before him and his father's house, implored the continuance of the divine favour and protection to his people, and supplicated a token of God's gracious acceptance of the house that had been built to his name, and the provision that had been made for observing the ordinances of his appointment. Never before had there been exhibited so imposing a display of external magnificence and grandeur, and never was monarch surrounded with so much of the pomp and splendours of royalty ; but on no occasion was worldly greatness ever so fairly estimated—never was it less valued for its own sake—and never did it minister less to the pride

of the human heart. The mightiest sovereign of his time hesitated not to appear in the midst of his subjects in the attitude of supplication, to lead the devotions of his people, and to put himself on a level with the humblest individual in the congregation of Israel; and so far from being elated with the magnificence of the offering which he was presenting to God, he felt and acknowledged how utterly unworthy it was of the divine acceptance. Though the temple which he had built had been reared under the immediate direction of a divine architect; though he had expended on it the richest treasure that the most powerful monarch had ever accumulated; and though he might have had good ground to hope, that it would stand the most permanent, as well as the most glorious monument by which the names of kings are transmitted to future ages; yet the feeling that was most deeply impressed on his mind was the inadequacy of all that he had done, or could do, to build a fit habitation for the glory of Jehovah; the prayer that he offered up breathed the same spirit with that of David his father: "Who am I, and what is my people, that we should be able to offer so willingly after this sort; for all things come of thee, and of thine own have we given thee;" and though he had been expressly assured that the Lord had chosen Jerusalem to put his name there, and that the house which he had built should certainly be ho-

noured with a visible manifestation of the divine glory; yet, as if he had felt some difficulty in crediting an assurance which implied such infinite condescension, he was constrained, in admiration and astonishment, to exclaim, "But will God in very deed dwell with men on the earth!"

That the exclamation in the text, as expressed and understood by Solomon, primarily referred to the permanent abode of the cloud of glory over the mercy seat in the temple, is evident from the circumstances in which it was uttered; and it will appear from a slight review of these circumstances, that though the words had never been intended to be otherwise applied, there was enough of the divine condescension manifested even in that dispensation, to call forth the tribute of admiration and gratitude here offered by the king of Israel. In all ages God had borne testimony to his own existence and sovereignty, in the constitution and government of the universe; and when, in consequence of the corruption and irreclaimable apostacy of mankind, he brought in the flood upon the world of the ungodly, the race of men by whom the earth was afterwards peopled, not only had access to all those intimations and proofs of the divine being and perfections which are open to the inspection of mankind in every age, but enjoyed moreover the advantage of a direct revelation from God, preserved in the family of Noah, transmitted by him to his posterity, and

enforced by the solemn and impressive warning which the execution of the divine judgments was obviously designed, and so well fitted to furnish. But if, in spite of all this, mankind did again relapse into idolatry; if they wilfully shut their eyes to the many palpable demonstrations of the divine being, by which the invisible things of God may be clearly seen and understood, even his eternal power and Godhead; if they permitted the revelation of his will to pass into oblivion, unheeded and unimproved, as if it had not been worthy of any care or concern of theirs to preserve it; and if "they changed the truth of God into a lie, worshipping and serving the creature more than the creator;" then it was an act of grace altogether divine, that ever another communication of his will was vouchsafed to them, or if ever they received any clearer manifestation of his character and perfections than those which they had already overlooked or despised. The whole of the divine procedure, therefore, towards the family of Abraham was a continued act of condescension to mankind at large, inasmuch as it was a visible departure from the ordinary method of God's providence, for the purpose of demonstrating his existence and supremacy, to those who had rendered themselves incapable of discovering these in his works, and who did not like to retain him in their knowledge; and with regard to the Israelites themselves, who were more immediately concerned in

that dispensation, there was in every part of it a marvellous accommodation to their character and circumstances. Not only were miracles wrought on their behalf, and visible interpositions employed to deliver and to chastise them; but circumstances were so ordered, and events overruled, that the sovereignty of God was strikingly contrasted with the vanity of heathen idols, and no conceivable means were left unemployed to impress them with the great fundamental truth, that the God of Israel was the only living and true God.

Such, it is obvious, was one of the immediate purposes of God's dealings with the children of Israel; and having thus furnished numerous and most palpable demonstrations of his supremacy—having put them in the quiet possession of an inheritance, which was itself a memorial of God's sovereignty and faithfulness—and having prescribed to them a law the most explicit, and religious ordinances the most expressive, to keep them in remembrance of what had been done for them; it might have been supposed that nothing farther was to be expected in the way of miraculous interposition, and that the providence of God towards them would thenceforth assume that silent and unseen method of procedure, which it usually observes in the moral government of the world at large. The condescension of God, however, did not terminate here. As if to prevent

the possibility of their forgetting to whom they had been indebted for all their mercies, and to place them in circumstances where they could not transfer to idols that homage and allegiance which were due only to himself, without virtually rejecting the testimony of their senses; he vouchsafed to permit a temple to be dedicated to his name, and to be set apart for the dwelling place of his more immediate presence; and while the rest of the world were blindly worshipping the works of their own hands, the glory of God was visibly displayed in the midst of his people, asserting his prerogative as alone entitled to the homage of religious worship, and by a manifestation of his existence, which could neither be denied nor misunderstood, preserving the world from that state of universal idolatry into which it had once before sunk, and towards which mankind still showed a decided and a growing tendency. Of the state of the heathen world, and of the propensities of his own subjects, Solomon could not be ignorant; and when he reflected how little the character both of the one and of the other corresponded with the forbearance which they had experienced, and the revelations of the divine will by which they might have profited, he had good reason to stand astonished at the divine condescension, and to say in the words of the text, "But will God in very deed dwell with men on the earth!"

But though we may well suppose, that senti-

ments like these were present to the mind of Solomon, and that the words of our text were designed, in the first instance at least, to express such sentiments, yet they cannot fail to suggest, and we cannot doubt that it was the mind of the spirit that they should suggest to the believer a still more impressive manifestation of the infinite condescension of God, than any that is to be found in the Old Testament dispensation. If by means of the Mosaical economy any portion of the human race was preserved from the abominations of idolatry; if the existence of the true God was thereby recognised where it would otherwise have been unacknowledged, or the homage of external worship secured to him which in other circumstances would have been paid to dumb idols; and if, in consequence of the manifestations which he made of himself to the Jews, such a testimony was borne to his character and perfections as was sufficient either to turn other nations from the worship of false gods, or to leave them without excuse; then unquestionably one of the objects of that economy was attained.

But, important as all this might be, it were a very partial and unworthy estimate of the Old Testament dispensation, to confine it to effects like these. The great design of every divine communication to the children of men has been to turn the hearts of sinners unto God; and so far as this object was accomplished through the medium of

the revelation granted to the Jews, it was only in consequence of its directing them by promises, or prophecy, or symbolical representations, to the one only method of reconciliation unfolded in the gospel. However splendid, then, might be the service of the sanctuary at Jerusalem; however marvellous the condescension of Jehovah in vouchsafing to fill the temple with a visible symbol of his presence; and however appropriate the language of our text as applied to so glorious a dispensation, we should form but a very inadequate conception of the true import of that language, did we not consider it as referring to a still more sublime subject of admiration, even "the great mystery of godliness, God manifest in the flesh." To what extent the mind of the king of Israel was enabled to foresee or understand that mystery, we do not venture to determine, nor is it necessary for us to inquire. But Christians cannot fail to perceive, that if the whole scheme of redemption had been fully unfolded to him—if he had foreseen the coming of Christ in the flesh, the circumstances and character in which he appeared, and the great object which he undertook to accomplish; he could not have more emphatically expressed the sentiments which that event was fitted to awaken, than in the words which he has here applied to the appearance of the divine glory in the temple. Whatever then might be the amount of the revelation granted to Solomon, we can be

in no doubt about the practical application which it becomes us to make of the text. It was dictated by the Spirit of God, to be put on record as a portion of those Scriptures that testify of Christ; and however interesting might be the circumstances in which it was originally expressed, we shall know but little of its meaning, and feel but little of its power, till we consider it as an intimation of the sentiments with which it becomes us to meditate on the incarnation of the Son of God, and to contemplate the grace and condescension of him "who, though rich, yet for our sakes became poor, that we through his poverty might be made rich."

I would, in the first place, then advert for a moment to the simple fact, that the glorious event contemplated in the text has actually been realized in the appearance of the Lord Jesus Christ in the likeness of our sinful flesh; and that in his person, "God has in very deed dwelt with men on the earth." There is, no doubt, in the incarnation of the Son of God, a mystery infinitely beyond the reach of our conceptions; and were we to confine our attention to the abstract doctrine alone, and merely contemplate the inexplicable union of the divine and human nature in the person of Christ, I know not that we should derive from the contemplation any other than impressions of the most profound reverence and awe. It is evident, however, from the manner in which

the subject is every where treated in Scripture, that so far from being designed to remove the divine character to a greater distance from our conceptions, or to render it more inaccessible to our understanding, it was intended, in gracious accommodation to the feebleness of our nature, to bring it as it were within the reach of our apprehension; and notwithstanding the mystery in which it is and must necessarily be involved, it has been presented to us in a light sufficiently simple and intelligible, to render it unspeakably the most affecting of all the manifestations which God has ever made of himself to the children of men. The symbol by which he gave intimation of his presence to the Old Testament church, though fitted to keep alive in their minds an habitual impression of his being and supremacy, to counteract their propensity to seek after other gods, and to furnish to them a permanent pledge of security and protection, so long as they adhered steadfastly to his covenant, did not immediately address itself to the sympathies and affections of their nature; and though they could say, what no other people ever could, that God had vouchsafed, by a visible display of his glory, to dwell in the midst of them; yet they were forbidden to approach the place where his honour dwelt, but in circumstances of the most awful and impressive solemnity, and were reminded, in every act of religious worship, of the infinite distance at which they stood re-

moved from the high and the holy one of Israel. But when he condescended to appear in the likeness of sinful flesh, the barriers which had formerly shut up the way of approach to his presence were broken down; mankind were admitted to hold intimate converse with him, in the same way, and through the same medium, by which they hold intercourse with one another; and the divine character, so far from wearing an aspect fitted to awe them into apprehension or dismay, presented nothing but what can be conceived most lovely and attractive in our own nature, were its perfection unimpaired, and its purity unsullied. Manifestations of almighty power in the person of our Lord, were no doubt exhibited in abundance; and every miracle that he wrought bore witness, that in him dwelt all the fulness of the Godhead bodily. But in his infinite condescension and mercy, even the lofty attribute of omnipotence assumed a winning aspect; and among the many mighty works that he performed, there was none of which it might not be said, that it was less fitted to excite astonishment, than to engage the affections and impress the heart. And is there not something in the very idea of the Son of God assuming the nature of any of his creatures, and in that nature deigning to hold with them intimate and endearing intercourse, that is fitted to awaken a feeling of more profound admiration, than any such visi-

ble display of the divine glory, as was vouchsafed to the Old Testament church? Even on the supposition that mankind had still been in a state of unimpeached rectitude, and unspotted purity, and that God had been manifested among them in their own nature, for the purpose of imparting to them more vivid impressions of his love, and more enlarged conceptions of his character; with what admiration and gratitude must they not have received such an instance of the divine condescension? But to our apprehension of things, that condescension becomes unspeakably more affecting, when we take into the account the character of those whose nature he assumed, and with whom he vouchsafed to associate. He took upon him the likeness of a sinful nature, and he tabernacled for a season among sinners; and though it is unquestionably true, that his unspotted holiness could receive no contamination or defilement from holding intercourse with the pollutions of a sinful world; yet it is never to be forgotten, that the very purity of his human soul must have rendered him feelingly alive to all that is revolting in the character of sin—that in dwelling among guilty creatures, he was placing himself in contact with what was most contrary and most offensive to his nature—and that the divine energy which dwelt in that nature, must have given to his perceptions of the malignity of moral evil, a depth, and an intenseness, infinitely

beyond any thing that it is possible for us to conceive. And could we suppose, then, that the King of Israel foresaw, by the spirit of prophecy, the incarnation of the Son of God ; in what more appropriate language could he have expressed himself than in the words before us, " Will God in very deed dwell with men on the earth !"

But the language of the text will appear still more obviously applicable to the dispensation which we are now considering, if we advert, in the second place, to the purpose for which God was manifested in the flesh. We have already seen, from a review of the circumstances in which Solomon's prayer was offered up, that though it indicated astonishing condescension on the part of God to favour the Jews with a visible and permanent intimation of his presence, inasmuch as no other testimony of that presence appeared sufficient to keep them habitually mindful of their obligations to worship him as the only living and true God ; yet if their views of the divine character had extended no farther than to the manifestation of his glory in the temple, they could have seen nothing there to explain to them the way of the sinner's acceptance with his Maker. Apart from the ordinances by which Christ was prefigured, God was manifested in light and glory that was inaccessible ; he appeared in all the majesty of a righteous lawgiver, exacting obedience to his commandments, and ready to exe-

cute judgment on transgressors; and when liberty of access to his more immediate presence was granted to the high priest once a year, it was on such conditions, and in such circumstances, as served to convey a more overwhelming idea of his majesty and holiness. But when Christ appeared, it was not only that, through the medium of human nature, he might convey to mankind a more distinct conception, and leave upon them a more vivid impression of the divine character; but that he might take away sin by the sacrifice of himself,—that he might consecrate a new and living way whereby sinners may have boldness to enter into the holiest by his blood,—and that he might vindicate the honour of the divine law, not by executing its penalty on transgressors, but by bearing their sins in his own body on the tree.

Such was the great purpose for which the Son of God became incarnate—a purpose most honourable to the divine character, and marvellously fitted to influence the character of man. The alienation of the human heart from God was not the effect of mere ignorance alone, nor was it to be remedied, therefore, by any manifestation of the divine excellence, however striking or intelligible. The will of God had long ere this been explicitly revealed; the authority of that revelation had been established by the most unequivocal evidence, and often vindicated by the execu-

tion of righteous judgment; and every interposition of a divine power, which the history of the Jews has recorded, may be considered as a solemn assertion of God's inalienable prerogative, in opposition to the idol worship which had usurped the homage that was due only to him. But whatever feelings of apprehension and dread the divine law might have awakened, the testimony both of Scripture and experience has shown, that no demonstration of its excellence, its authority, or the inviolable nature of its sanctions, would of itself disarm the enmity, or engage the affections of mankind: and that, after every objection to its reasonableness has been silenced, the heart will be as far as ever from being reconciled to its spirit. Not only then has the mercy of God been magnified, in taking the vindication of his law into his own hand, and making provision for the pardon of the sinner in a way consistent with his own unchangeable rectitude; but his infinite wisdom and condescension have been manifested, in so adapting his procedure to the circumstances of our fallen nature, as to present his character to us in the only conceivable light in which it could ever engage our heart, or secure for himself that place in our affections from which we had shut him out, and which it is the great object of all his dealings with us to recover. He has in his holy law required us to love him with all our heart; and he could no more fail to

exact this homage than he could cease to hold the sovereignty of the universe. But alienated as we were from God, and enemies to him in our hearts and by wicked works, we never would be either reasoned or terrified into this love; and the more rigorously the law should enforce its requirement, the more obstinately would the heart resist its demands. In his infinite compassion and condescension, therefore, he has assailed us by another and a more persuasive argument,—even the manifestation of his own Son in the flesh, who has not only made a full and satisfactory atonement for sin, but, by a life of unwearied benevolence, has given us every possible assurance of God's willingness to be reconciled to us, and furnished every conceivable motive that can persuade us to be reconciled to him. That such was the design and tendency of all the intercourse which the Son of God vouchsafed to hold with sinners, during his abode on earth, is abundantly evident from the whole tenor of his life; and though his human nature has been exalted to a state of glory, his gracious communications to the children of men have not therefore ceased. The Scriptures have expressly declared, that when he ascended up on high, and led captivity captive, he received gifts for men, yea for the rebellious also, that the Lord God might dwell among them; and the experience of multitudes in every age has borne witness, that though

visible manifestations of the divine glory are no longer vouchsafed, an intercourse has been established between heaven and earth that never will be broken off; that the promise of the holy spirit, with which Christ comforted his disciples on the eve of his separation from them, has not been, and will not be retracted; and that God therefore still condescends in very deed "to dwell with men on the earth."

It will readily be admitted by every professing Christian, that in the dispensation to which we have thus shortly adverted, there is every thing that can awaken our admiration or call forth our gratitude; and that of all the divine communications recorded in Scripture, the manifestation of the Son of God in the flesh is that which is best fitted to inspire the sentiment expressed in the text. We are naturally led to ask then what, generally speaking, has been the effect which this dispensation has produced on the children of men? Among those to whom this gracious intelligence has been announced, and by whom it is professedly believed, have the sentiments of the king of Israel been universally, or even very commonly felt?—has "the mystery of Godliness, God manifest in the flesh," occupied any considerable portion of their time or their attention?—and among the various subjects that have excited their curiosity, or have engaged the intellectual and moral principles of their nature, has the appearance of the

Son of God among men taken its place, as unspeakably the most interesting and important? Is there not, on the contrary, reason to fear, that with multitudes it has been almost unknown, and to every practical purpose altogether unheeded; and that any other subject of inquiry or of research will awaken an interest which they have never felt for the sublimest of all the discoveries that have ever been brought within the sphere of human knowledge? Every day is bearing witness to the ardour and perseverance with which the human mind will prosecute the investigation of any thing dark or mysterious; how easily it is arrested by any occurrence which wears the aspect of novelty, or indicates a departure from the ordinary course of things; and with what satisfaction it will dwell on the explanation of the secret causes by which such an event has been brought about. And while so much intellectual exertion is expended in the examination of what is wise in art, and wonderful in nature; while dangers are encountered, and privations are endured, in order to add another fact to the accumulating sum of human knowledge; and while no region of the world which we inhabit, is left unexplored, where there is any hope of discovering what is interesting in its present state, or what will throw light on the changes which it has undergone; is it not melancholy to think, that multitudes have hardly a thought to bestow on the most marvellous of

all the events that ever will be recorded of it—the appearance of its almighty Creator in the likeness of sinful flesh; an event which impresses the character of littleness on every object of human ambition and pursuit; and on which the everlasting destiny of innumerable multitudes of immortal spirits must depend! I know not that there is to be found, in the register of human guilt, a more striking proof than this of the heart's alienation from God; for, whatever may be the virtues in which the sinner is disposed to glory, or whatever may be the good qualities on the strength of which he is fearlessly surveying the solemnities of a coming judgment, it is nevertheless true, that so long as he remains unaffected by the manifestation of the Son of God in the flesh, and so long as he is conscious that this wonderful dispensation has never awakened his interest, or exercised any direct influence on the moral principles of his nature, he must be without any serious conviction of the reality of that truth, and chargeable with virtually rejecting the testimony of God concerning his son. Such, I am persuaded, will be the acknowledgment of every believer who can look back to the time when he read and heard of the incarnation of the Son of God, with as little concern as he would hear of an event of every day's occurrence; nor would there be any thing more inexplicable to him in his former infatuation, than his insensibility to a truth so interesting

and momentous, were he not convinced that he did not then seriously believe it. Now that this truth has assumed in his estimation the place and the importance which it ought always to have held, he feels that the habitual recollection of it is essential to spiritual life and comfort; that if he would cherish a lively apprehension of the love of God, and a deep impression of the obligations under which that love has laid him, he must be perpetually adverting to the incarnation, sufferings, and death of Jesus; and that, so far from feeling his interest in the subject decay, the more frequently and devoutly that he contemplates it, the more deeply will he sympathize in the sentiments of the king of Israel, "Will God in very deed dwell with men on earth?"

SERMON V.

THE REWARD OF THE REDEEMER'S SUFFERINGS.

ISAIAH liii. 11.

He shall see of the travail of his soul, and shall be satisfied.

It is hardly necessary perhaps to state, what must be obvious to all who are in any degree conversant with the Scriptures, that the words of the text, as well as the whole chapter from which the text is taken, refer to the person and mediatorial work of the Redeemer. The design of the passage indeed is so very plain, and it contains so faithful a delineation of our Lord's character, so minute an account of his sufferings, and so unequivocal a statement of the great object which these sufferings were designed to accomplish, that it resembles more a compend of gospel history, and a summary of gospel doctrine, than a prophetical representation uttered seven hundred years before that history was written, or the doctrine which it contains was fully promulgated; and nothing can more clearly prove how generally the prophecy is understood as referring to Christ, than the simple fact, that when Christians would

seek the most appropriate language wherein to speak of the Saviour's sufferings, or find the most explicit declarations of his substitution in the room of sinners, there is no portion of Scripture to which they are wont more frequently to betake themselves, than the passage before us. It were a very unnecessary work then to set about formally proving, that Christ is the person here spoken of, and the accomplishment of his mediatorial undertaking the subject of the prophet's prediction; and assuming, therefore, what is too obvious to be mistaken or disputed, we shall proceed to consider the import of the prediction itself, that the Redeemer "shall see of the travail of his soul, and shall be satisfied."

And, in entering upon the subject, we are naturally led to advert, in the first instance, to the very striking and emphatic language employed by the prophet, with a reference both to the nature and the result of the Redeemer's mediatorial work. In the preceding verses he had described the sufferings of Christ in all their diversified aggravations, and in language expressive of the most painful inflictions to which human nature is exposed; setting them forth under every figure that could convey a lively apprehension of their magnitude, and employing every variety of expression that can aid our conceptions of their intenseness. Our Lord is there represented as despised and rejected of men, a man of sorrows and

acquainted with grief; as one from whom all men hid their faces as unworthy of a single look of affectionate sympathy or friendly regard; and one who, though substituted to bear the griefs and carry the sorrows of others, was treated as if he had himself been an outcast from the divine favour, and as if for his own transgressions he had been stricken, smitten of God, and afflicted. He is spoken of as being wounded for our transgressions, and bruised for our iniquities; the accumulated offences of an apostate and alienated world are represented as meeting or being laid upon him; and, setting forth the expiation of these offences under the figure of an overwhelming debt, which was exacted of him as the representative of sinners, the prophet describes him as meeting the day of reckoning in all its severity, and as required to satisfy its demands to the full extent of their unremitted and unmitigated amount. The result too of his substitution or suretiship on behalf of the guilty, had been set forth in language equally strong and explicit. The chastisement that was laid upon him is represented as having sealed our reconciliation with God; the stripes which he endured are assigned as the ground of our acquittal from the punishment to which we stood obnoxious; and in pouring out his soul an offering for sin, whereby he purchased to himself a holy seed, we are assured that he accomplished an object on which God

looks with infinite complacency. It might appear then, that it was hardly possible to employ any language more powerful or expressive, to describe either the magnitude of our Lord's sufferings, or the extent of the blessed consequences with which they were to be followed; and yet I apprehend a still more impressive view is given us of both, when it is said in the words of the text, "He shall see of the travail of his soul and shall be satisfied." When we reflect on the dignity of the Redeemer's character; when we bear in mind that he was God manifest in the flesh—that his holy human nature was in a state of intimate union with the divine—and that every faculty of his soul was so exalted, and strengthened, and sustained by a divine energy, as to impart to him an unlimited power of endurance; how profound must have been the suffering, and how intense the agony, that could be denominated the travail of such a soul; and when we think, on the other hand, of his vast comprehension of mind, his enlarged perceptions of moral excellence, and his unlimited capacity for the enjoyment of all that is pure, and elevated, and holy; how glorious must have been the result of an undertaking, with the accomplishment of which a soul like his could be said to have been satisfied! So long as the prophet employs language, in speaking of the Redeemer's sufferings, which is familiar to us as expressive of the diversified afflictions to which we

are ourselves exposed, we may feel as if we would attach a definite idea to that language; but our imagination utterly fails us in attempting to conceive of the full meaning of his representation, when, in speaking of the sufferings of Christ, and the glory that should follow, he tells us that "he shall see of the travail of his soul, and shall be satisfied."

These considerations may perhaps appear at first sight to exclude all further inquiry into the import of the text, and to forbid our attempting any illustration of a subject infinitely too profound for human comprehension; and assuredly it were a very vain and presumptuous undertaking, to attempt offering any illustration that would at all approach to a full explanation of that import. But however inadequate our ideas on the subject must necessarily be, and however far we may fall short in our attempts to form a clear apprehension of it to its full extent; yet there are views of the fruits of Christ's sufferings which may aid the feebleness of our conceptions both of the magnitude of his undertaking, and the satisfaction with which he contemplates its accomplishment; these it is not only a competent, but a most important and salutary exercise for us frequently to contemplate; and to some of them, therefore, I would now shortly direct your attention.

And I observe, in the first place, that the Re-

deemer sees of the travail of his soul, and is satisfied, in the free remission of sins which, through his blood, and in his name, has been proclaimed to the children of men. When the apostle tells us that God was in Christ reconciling the world unto himself, not imputing unto men their trespasses—that there is now no condemnation to them who are in Christ Jesus,—and that the Son of God hath made peace by the blood of his cross; it is obviously implied in all these, and in many similar declarations of Scripture, that mankind were in a state of enmity against their Maker; that they had dared to dispute God's prerogative to rule; and ventured to proclaim war against the sovereignty of him in whom they live, and move, and have their being. I do not stop at present formally to substantiate this charge, by enumerating the evidences of its truth, which Scripture and experience furnish in abundance; for besides that it is professedly acknowledged by all who admit the most elementary truths of Christianity, it is obvious that it must be assumed before we can see any thing interesting, or even intelligible, in the Gospel. But let us reflect for a moment on the truth itself; let us contemplate a world of intelligent, accountable, and immortal creatures, leagued in feeble but desperate rebellion against their Creator; and let us endeavour to conceive of the guilt, and misery, and hopelessness of such a state. In point

of fact, indeed, mankind have not been abandoned to that hopelessness, nor was there ever a time when there existed not in the divine mind a gracious purpose to interpose on their behalf. We are not at liberty, therefore, to make any supposition about what would have been the consequence of such an abandonment; for it becomes not us to inquire what the divine procedure would have been respecting the present condition of mankind, had no interposition on their behalf been contemplated on the part of God—whether their rebellion could have been for one moment tolerated, without awarding to it its full measure of retribution—or whether, in such circumstances, the human race could have been permitted to extend beyond the individuals who were first involved in apostacy and guilt. But the determination of these questions has nothing to do with the subject of our present inquiry. It is still true of mankind universally, that they are by nature the children of wrath, enemies to God in their hearts and by wicked works, dead in trespasses and sins. Nor is the perpetuity of such a miserable condition merely a supposable state of things which, in certain circumstances, might have existed; for though the finally impenitent do so far reap the benefit of the Redeemer's mediatorial interposition, as to enjoy a season of respite, and to have tendered to them the overtures of a free remission; yet, in the sight of him who

comprehends at one view all the circumstances of their case, their condition is just as miserable and hopeless as if no such interposition had ever taken place. When the eternal Son of God, therefore, in the exercise of his infinite wisdom and foreknowledge, contemplated our fallen and guilty race, it presented to his eye a world of immortal spirits lying under the sentence of Jehovah's displeasure, the withering influence of Jehovah's curse; and he beheld them sinking under the weight of that almighty arm that must be stretched out for the overthrow of sin—a weight under which his own holy human soul, strengthened and sustained as it was by a divine energy, afterwards travailed and was in pain. He saw that they were necessarily forsaken of God, because they had voluntarily forsaken him; that unless the honour of the divine law were vindicated, and the rectitude of the divine government placed beyond suspicion or impeachment, the Almighty could hold with them no friendly communion or intercourse; that his very beneficence —that infinite and eternal propension of the Godhead towards the communication of blessedness of which this world was itself the offspring, was so bound up by the necessity of that harmony that must ever subsist among the moral attributes of the divine nature, that no one expression of love, nor one intimation of mercy could be made to them; and that no ray of light, from

the gracious countenance of the Father of lights, could ever illuminate the darkness to which they had been consigned.

Such, it is obvious, must have been the condition of all the successive generations of mankind, as they appeared in the divine foreknowledge of the Redeemer; and when, by his own interposition, therefore, he dispelled the cloud that had shut them out from the light of life; when he opened up a way by which the Almighty, without derogating from any of his attributes, could again hold friendly communication with his alienated creatures; and when he beheld that communication actually renewed, not by the proposal of hard and difficult terms of reconciliation, but with an unqualified announcement of a free and full remission; is there not a glory in the achievement which effected such a change in the state of things between heaven and earth, on which we can conceive the Redeemer to dwell with infinite complacency and satisfaction? The believer, to whom the glad tidings of the gospel are the well-spring of all his peace, and consolation, and joy, may conceive something of the desolation that must reign in a world of immortal creatures, severed from the fountain of life, and shut out from all communion with the Father of their spirits; for he has only to ask himself what his own condition would have been, had he remained in a state of hopeless alienation from God. But

however vivid and enlarged his conceptions of such a state of things may be, they must fall infinitely short of the profound and comprehensive views of the wretchedness of that state, which presented themselves to the mind of the Saviour; and however intelligibly, therefore, he may conceive of the Redeemer's complacency and delight in surveying this first fruit, so to speak, of his mediatorial undertaking, there must still be a meaning infinitely beyond his reach, in the declaration of the text, that "he sees of the travail of his soul, and that he is satisfied."

I have thus adverted to what, in our apprehension of things, is the first in the order of nature, of the blessed effects of our Lord's substitution in the room of sinners—his placing this world on the footing of a new relation to heaven—bringing it as it were within the range of that beneficence from which it had excluded itself—and opening up a way by which it might be permitted and invited to return into a state of amity with God, and fellowship with all that is holy and happy in his intelligent creation. I observe then, in the next place, that the Redeemer sees of the travail of his soul, and is satisfied, in the actual return of sinners, when by the knowledge and belief of the truth, they are turned from darkness to light, and from the power of Satan unto God. And in forming some conception of the glorious result of Christ's mediatorial work as manifested in the

conversion and sanctification of sinners, it is not necessary that we should contemplate the extent to which it will be carried, or that we should be able to estimate the numbers that will actually be partakers of the happy fruits of his righteousness; inasmuch as every individual case of such a change does clearly exemplify the glory and blessedness that result from the Redeemer's undertaking. When the Scriptures speak of mankind in their collective capacity, and represent them as a world lying in sin, we are not to conceive of the guilt and misery implied in that statement, as attaching to them in a body, and so shared among a multitude as to palliate the one, and mitigate the other, to each individually. The countenance of numbers may indeed encourage the sinner in his rebellion, and, till he is awakened from his infatuation, he may flatter himself that, be his future fate what it will, it is less formidable from its being the fate of thousands as well as of himself. But if he is an enemy to God, his guilt is just as indefensible, and his fate as irrevocable, as if he were the solitary revolted subject in God's moral government; and as no number can sanction that revolt, so he will find that numbers will contribute nothing to the alleviation of its punishment. In as far, therefore, as the illustration of this part of our subject is concerned, we may take the conversion of a single sinner just as well as that of multitudes; the one will serve to show,

as clearly as the other, the nature of the evil that has been counteracted, and of the good that has been secured by the Saviour's sufferings and death; and by such an illustration too, we are more likely to place the subject in an intelligible and affecting point of view.

On this principle, then, I would advert for a little to the contrast between the condition of the man who is still without God and without hope in the world, and that of the person who, by the faith of the gospel, has entered into peace and reconciliation with his maker; and I would appeal, for the faithfulness and accuracy of the representation, to any one in whose experience that contrast has been exemplified—who can recollect the time when he was blind to the meaning, and a stranger to the power of the truth, but who has now experimentally learned what it is to have peace and joy in believing. Such a man will acknowledge, that though he had all his life long been eagerly engaged in the pursuit of happiness, he had never attained to any thing like real, far less to permanent peace of mind; that at one period or another every source of gratification had fallen short of his expectations, and left some longing desire which it could not satisfy; that the mere hope of finding in the object on which he had set his affections an enduring good, and the very labour which he underwent in pursuing it, constituted by far the larger portion of all the en-

joyment which it ever yielded him; and that a change of pursuit was only a change of form which vexation and disappointment assumed. He will recollect too, that amidst all the diversity of objects to which he successively transferred his affections, there was not one that had any reference to his future destiny, or could contribute ought to his eternal well-being; that even if he had attained to the very summit of his wishes, and could have given to his enjoyments all the permanency of which their nature is capable, not one of them could have survived the period of his own short and precarious existence here; and that if in this condition he had been summoned away from the objects that had occupied and enslaved his whole soul, he must have entered the world of spirits, as ignorant of the blessedness of heaven, as if he had never heard of its existence, and as destitute of every thing that could qualify him for relishing that blessedness, as if he had never been endowed with any capacity of enjoyment. Nor is it merely the sad spectacle of an immortal spirit expending the energy of its imperishable nature on perishable objects, that will present itself to the believer, on taking a survey of his unregenerated state. He will acknowledge, that fair and faultless as his character might appear in the eye of the world, a principle of ungodliness pervaded the whole current of his thoughts, and the whole course of his actions; that amidst

the endless variety of conceptions that were daily formed in his mind, and there entertained and dwelt upon with complacency and delight, there was no admittance for one solemn, and reverential, and affectionate thought of God; that though in conformity with established usage, or to sooth some occasional misgivings of conscience, he might tolerate for a season the forms of external worship, and seem for a time to recognise his maker, yet he could not bear to cherish so vivid an impression of the divine presence as to give to that presence any thing like a reality; that he was labouring in fact systematically, though not always conscious perhaps that he was doing so, to shut God altogether out of his thoughts; and that he was thus doing all that a feeble creature can do to annihilate the very essence of the Godhead.

Such is substantially the condition of every man who reaches the years of understanding in a state of alienation from God; and let me now advert for a moment to what it becomes, when he is brought to the knowledge and belief of the truth. He not only abandons the vain and infatuated idea of finding in any of his former gratifications a source of pure and permanent enjoyment; but in the death of Christ—that truth, which, for so long a period, made scarcely any, even the feeblest impression upon his mind—he sees the most convincing and the most affecting evidence, that the very being whom he had laboured to forget was

all the while providing for him a better portion; God manifesting himself in Christ as a reconciled father has now gained, not only admission into his heart, but even the ascendancy over the other objects of his affection; the wonders of redeeming love, now seen and in some measure rightly apprehended, have awakened desires altogether new, and capacities of enjoyment which he did not know that he possessed; and he has relinquished the lying vanities which he once pursued, not merely because they had deceived and disappointed him, but because he has chosen a better part, and one that shall never be taken from him. He is well aware that the reparation of his moral and spiritual nature is still far from being completed —that much darkness yet remains to be dissipated, and much impurity to be washed away. But from the moment he received it as a faithful saying and worthy of all acceptation that Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners—from the moment he could repose on the Redeemer's righteousness, approach God as his reconciled father in Christ, and feel boldness to enter into the holiest by the blood of Jesus, from that moment the transformation was complete enough to unfold to him a new world—to place before him the character and government of God in a light in which he had never before seen them—and engage him in the pursuit of happiness, which an eternity of enjoyment will neither exhaust nor

impair. And is not a change like this an achievement in itself glorious? Is it not fitted to attract the notice, and call forth the admiration of every holy intelligent being? And must it not be an object on which God himself, the source of all moral excellence, looks with complacency and approbation? The Christian, even with his limited perceptions of spiritual things, cannot fail to see it in this light. But when we reflect on the character of him by whom this achievement has been won—on the infinite depth of his insight into the malignity of sin, and the infinite extent of his capacity for estimating the excellence of holiness—on the deformity which the unregenerate sinner must have presented to his eye, and the beauty with which the same sinner will be clothed, when he is presented faultless before the presence of the divine glory; we must be persuaded that there is in the mind of the Saviour a complacency in contemplating this blessed work, of which we can form but a very inadequate conception; and that in the conversion and sanctification of sinners "he sees of the travail of his soul and is satisfied."

So far the illustrations which I have attempted to give of the sublime truth contained in the text, feeble and imperfect as all illustrations of such a subject must necessarily be, are, I trust, sufficiently intelligible. They are drawn from considerations that must frequently have presented themselves to the Christian's mind, and in so far as our own na-

ture is concerned, I have not travelled in search of them beyond the limits of Christian experience. It must be obvious, however, to all, that though we could have proceeded a great deal farther, and even unfolded, in all their magnitude and extent, the blessed fruits of the Redeemer's sufferings, as far as these fruits can be seen and felt in the present life, we should still have seen but the first ripe ears that give intimation of a plentiful harvest. Even from what we have already contemplated, a great deal may be gathered to elevate our conceptions of the greatness of the Saviour's mediatorial work. But could we in imagination follow an unregenerate sinner into the world of spirits—could we see the unsubdued enmity of his carnal mind liberated from every restraint, and left to expend itself in desperate malignity against its Maker—could we estimate aright his growing dread and hatred of God, without the power of shutting him out of his thoughts, and the growing strength of unsanctified desires, without the possibility of satisfying them for a single moment —and could we conceive with any degree of clearness of the worm that dieth not, and the fire that is not quenched; O how unspeakably more enlarged would be our views of that tremendous accumulation of moral evil, which Christ by his death has arrested and counteracted! And, on the other hand, could we follow into the regions of blessedness the spirit of a just man made perfect—could

we see the entire conformity of his nature to the glorious image of the Son of God, and the blissful communion which he is permitted to hold with the Saviour that bought him—could we estimate his growing capacity for the enjoyment of divine things, and the renewed communications of divine love whereby he is ever made blessed, up to the full measure of that capacity—or could we conceive aright of the eternally progressive enlargement of all his moral and intellectual faculties, and the endless succession of new discoveries, respecting the character and government of God, whereon these faculties may be exercised; then how small a portion would the Christian's attainments in this life appear of that eternal accumulation of moral good, which the Redeemer died to commence, and is exalted to carry on! Of these fruits of his sufferings and death we can form no adequate idea. They constitute a field of discovery on which the glorified spirits of the just shall enter at death, and which an eternity of intellectual and moral advancement will not exhaust; till this body of sin and death shall be laid down, we can see but a feeble glimpse of them, through the impurity and imperfection by which we are encompassed; and after all our efforts to conceive of them aright, we must adopt the language of the apostle, "that eye hath not seen, nor ear heard, neither have entered into the heart of man, the things which God hath prepared for those that love him." But

by his all comprehensive mind they are fully perceived and understood; he requires not to wait the actual manifestation of the successive steps by which the redeemed shall be progressively approaching nearer to God, in order to comprehend fully the blessed effects of his mediatorial work; and in the contemplation of the evil which he has thus put down, and of the good which he has substituted in its room, "he sees of the travail of his soul and is satisfied."

I am persuaded that the believer can require no suggestions of mine, to draw from the subject which we have now been considering reflections at once elevating and instructive. That he should ever have been received in any way, and on any terms into a state of reconciliation with God; that such a ransom should have been given for his soul as the precious blood of Jesus Christ; that his impenitence and unbelief should have been met with so much forbearance and mercy on the part of this long despised Saviour; and that, after all his ingratitude and disobedience, his offended Father should have received him graciously, healed his backslidings, and loved him freely—this can never cease to be the subject of his admiration and gratitude. But that his adoption into the family, and his investiture with the privileges of the children of God, should be spoken of as it is in the words of our text; that it should be represented as contributing to that joy which was

set before the Redeemer when he endured the cross and despised the shame; and that the Spirit of God should speak of it as the reward of the Saviour's agony, the blessed fruit of the travail of his soul wherewith he is satisfied—this is a view of the believer's salvation that cannot fail to awaken sentiments which no language can adequately express, but which we would earnestly entreat him affectionately to cherish.

But, on the other hand, in what an aggravated light is the guilt of the unbeliever placed by a representation like that before us! It is indeed true, even with regard to the final impenitency of such a man, that as it can detract nothing from the essential glory of the divine nature, so it can in no degree mar the infinite satisfaction and delight with which the Saviour will eternally regard the completion of his mediatorial work. But is it not very obvious that the man who has hitherto treated the gospel testimony with indifference, or who has regarded the death of Christ as a mere matter of opinion, in which he feels no interest, and scarcely sees any meaning, is chargeable with making light of what our text represents as infinitely momentous; that he is guilty, as far as his power can go, of attempting to rob the Saviour of the honour that he has won; and that were it a possible or a conceivable thing, his unbelief would go to mar the blessedness of that glorious triumph? It is indeed a very appalling idea, and

we might well hesitate on venturing to give it utterance. But still is it not true?—and if it be true are we not bound to declare it? And yet we would rather address unbelievers in the language of entreaty; nor do we know of a more persuasive argument wherewith to assail them than that which is furnished by our text. We would urge them to reflect on the testimony which it bears to God's gracious designs towards them; we would remind them how it accords with all the forbearance and mercy which they have hitherto experienced; we would show them that so far from there being any reluctance on his part to receive them, he has been long and graciously waiting for their return; we would proclaim to them a free forgiveness, unfettered by one hard or difficult condition; and we are warranted to assure them, that if they would but receive the divine testimony concerning Jesus, he would, in their conversion as in that of others, "see of the travail of his soul, and be satisfied."

SERMON VI.

THE UNSATISFYING NATURE OF WORLDLY ENJOYMENTS.

ISAIAH lv. 2.

Wherefore do ye spend money for that which is not bread, and your labour for that which satisfieth not?

THE language of the text is the language of remonstrance; and to determine who the persons are to whom it is addressed, we have only to refer to the preceding context. "Ho, every one that thirsteth," saith the prophet in the first verse of this chapter, "come ye to the waters, and he that hath no money, come ye, buy, and eat; yea, come, buy wine and milk without money and without price." Of this invitation it is abundantly evident that it is addressed to every human being without exception, inasmuch as the expression, he who thirsteth, is descriptive of the state of every man who is not actually in possession of happiness permanent in its nature, and adequate to satisfy him up to the full measure of his capacity of enjoyment; and it might be made to appear equally evident, that the waters of which

they are invited to partake are the blessings of Christ's salvation, inasmuch as it was of these blessings that the prophet was speaking in the preceding chapters, and as the figurative expression which he employs is that by which they are frequently represented in Scripture.

The prophet's invitation then necessarily implies, what indeed is expressly stated in the following context, that they who comply with it, shall find in the waters, of which he invites them to partake, that which will fully satisfy their thirst after happiness. It does not, indeed, promise to put them at once in possession of that happiness to the full extent of what they are capable of enjoying, or to exempt them from a share in those afflictions and disappointments which are inseparable from a state of imperfection and discipline. On the contrary, the very figure which he makes use of obviously implies successive applications on their part to the fountain of living waters; and it is on this ground that we have already represented the invitation as universally applicable to all mankind. But interpreting the prophet's language agreeably to the general tenor of Scripture, it assures them, that in the sense of the divine favour they shall have peace of conscience, even the peace of God, that passeth understanding; that in a growing conformity to the divine image, they shall be progressively advancing towards the perfection of their nature; and that in the eter-

nal enjoyment of the divine presence they shall be made fully and permanently blessed.

But on the other hand, the invitation does as necessarily imply, that they who reject it never will find anywhere else the happiness which it promises to bestow; that every other source of gratification to which they may betake themselves will sooner or later be dried up; that though the longings of spirit by which they are ever prompted to seek after a variety or an augmentation of enjoyment, may for a time appear to be satisfied in the pursuit, or in the possession of some object on which the affections were placed, they must in the end be left without any object that can at all satisfy them; and that every scheme of happiness, therefore, however wisely laid or vigorously pursued, must at length terminate in misery and disappointment. All this is obviously implied in the prophet's invitation, as it is unequivocally taught in many other passages of Scripture; and it is to such, therefore, as reject that invitation, with the hope of finding in worldly things a sufficient and an enduring good, that he addresses the remonstrance in our text, "Wherefore do ye spend money for that which is not bread, and your labour for that which satisfieth not?"

Such appears to be the import of the declaration before us, and to those who believe the account which scripture gives of the present condition, and the future destiny of man, the truth of that

declaration must appear incontrovertible. We are there assured, in the plainest and most explicit language, frequently repeated, and most powerfully inculcated, that man is a creature destined to live for ever; that the present life is but the infancy or beginning of his being; that the gratification which sensible objects afford him is in its very nature inadequate to the consummation of his happiness, and wants all the permanency which is essential to the portion of an immortal spirit; that God himself is the only sufficient portion of the soul that was formed at first after his own likeness; and that the perfection and blessedness of man's nature, as an intelligent and moral being, consist in his entire conformity to the divine image, and the uninterrupted enjoyment of the divine favour. We are moreover assured, on the same authority, that man is a fallen and degenerate creature; that, judicially, he is under sentence of exclusion from the blessedness which he was originally formed to enjoy; that even though this sentence were blotted out, there is still about him such a moral incapacity for the enjoyment of that blessedness, as requires him to undergo a spiritual regeneration of nature; and that it is only when he has been thus acquitted of the guilt, and purified from the polluting and debasing influence of sin, that he is meet for the inheritance of the saints in light, and qualified for relishing the fulness of joy that is before the face of God,

and the pleasures which are at his right hand for evermore.

Such is the account which Scripture gives us of the condition of man; and, in as far as it relates to the insufficiency of present gratification to afford him full and permanent happiness, it is confirmed by the universal testimony of mankind; for there is no man living who has not had in his own experience a thousand distinct intimations, that every such gratification is essentially imperfect, and must be transitory. But the Scriptures are equally explicit in assuring us, that there is a way by which the evils that sin has entailed upon us may be remedied, and in explaining to us the nature and the application of that remedy. They tell us, that through the obedience and sufferings, and death of Jesus Christ, as the surety and representative of sinners, there is tendered to all a free remission of sin; that this truth understood and believed, removes from the conscience of the sinner that depressing sense of guilt, and alarming apprehension of danger, which served at once to embitter all his enjoyments, and to strengthen him in his aversion to spiritual and divine things; that through the influence of the Holy Spirit opening his eyes to the divine character as revealed in the gospel, he begins to see and appreciate the excellence of that character, and longs after a growing conformity to it; that his affections and desires, which had formerly been

placed on objects that successively failed to satisfy them, are thus turned to God as the object of his supreme regard—the being whose favour he sees to be life, and whose loving kindness he esteems better than life; and that being thus turned from darkness to light, and from the power of Satan unto God, he receives forgiveness of sins, and inheritance among them that are sanctified by faith that is in Christ Jesus. This is the plain language of Scripture respecting what constitutes the well-being of man as an immortal creature; and if the Scripture be admitted to be of divine authority, then whatever may be the object of the sinner's pursuit, or whatever be the enjoyments on which he has set his heart, so long as he does not see and believe that a sense of the divine favour, a growing conformity to the divine image, and the hope of dwelling for ever in the divine presence, are essential to the perfection and blessedness of his nature, nothing can be more obvious and undeniable, than that he must be "spending his money for that which is not bread, and his labour for that which satisfieth not."

But plain and obvious as the truth of these remarks must be to every man who will make them the subject of a moment's serious reflection, yet with multitudes we fear they are disregarded and practically denied. We do not hesitate indeed to affirm, that there must be in the unregenerate

mind a disposition to question the statement in the text; that though the most devoted, and the most successful votary of the world may never have been able to say that he has found in it a satisfying good, yet they who follow his footsteps will not relinquish the hope of being still more successful; that even after successive disappointments, and the failure of the very fairest of their prospects, their expectations of a new enterprise will be as high and sanguine as ever; and that notwithstanding the abatements which years of experience may compel them to make from their estimate of worldly enjoyments, yet they will feel at least, if they do not venture openly to allege, that they have been very unfairly characterized in the passage before us, when it is said of those who pursue them, "that they spend their money for that which is not bread, and their labour for that which satisfieth not."

In testimony of this statement, we may appeal to the experience and observation of every day. None who are in the slightest degree acquainted with the state of society, even in those places where Christianity is generally professed, can be ignorant, that there are multitudes who show very unequivocally by the whole tenour of their sentiments and conduct, that present enjoyments are all the portion that they have ever seriously desired, or distinctly conceived of; and who, so far from seeing in that which the Scrip-

tures represent as essential to the moral well-being of man, any thing that they would deliberately choose as their chief good, do substantially avow that it is either utterly unintelligible, or supremely offensive to them. Regard for the opinion, or respect for the feelings of those around them, may indeed lay them under some restraint in expressing all that they feel on the subject of divine things. But, notwithstanding every such restraint, opportunities enough will occur for their showing very expressively what their feelings are, and how destitute and unhappy they would think themselves, could they find nothing more substantial or satisfying than the enjoyment to be derived from the sense of the divine favour, a growing resemblance to the image of God, and the prospect of holding with him eternal and uninterrupted communion. Such persons then, do in fact openly deny the statement in the text. They do not believe that they are spending their money for that which is not bread, and their labour for that which satisfieth not; and so long as they are not convinced of this, they will see no value, and probably very little meaning in the prophet's invitation, to "come and buy wine and milk without money and without price." The truth is, that persons of this description must be living in a state of infidelity with regard to the truth of Scripture generally, or what is in reality the same thing, they must have succeeded in effectu-

ally shutting out all serious reflection on what is there revealed respecting the character of God and the future destiny of man; for could they be brought seriously to contemplate the simple truth that there is awaiting them a day of reckoning and retribution; did they think of the character of him who is then to reckon with them; and would they ask themselves what grounds they have to believe that the result of that reckoning can be in their favour, they would find enough in this one truth to darken the fairest of their prospects, and embitter the sweetest of their pleasures; they would see that a sense of the divine favour is not the visionary and unsubstantial thing that they once supposed it to be; and unless they could contrive again to dismiss the truth, they would very soon discover in their own experience, that they had all along been "spending their money for that which is not bread, and their labour for that which satisfieth not."

I have very little doubt, that with regard to those whose lives are directly at variance with the plainest requirements of the divine law, and who are avowedly spending their strength and their substance in the pursuit of ungodly pleasures, the truth of the statement now submitted will readily be acknowledged by all, who maintain any thing like the decency and decorum of a Christian profession. But it is possible that even among this last class there may be some of whom the same

statement is substantially true; and who, notwithstanding the respectful attention which they give to the external forms and ordinances of Christianity, may be most appropriately addressed in the language of the text. I am aware, that where such a profession has been long maintained, and where there has been no inconsistency of so glaring a nature as to bring it into suspicion in the eyes of others, and scarcely one misgiving, perhaps, respecting its sincerity in the minds of the individuals themselves, the supposition now made may appear a very harsh and offensive one. This, however, does not at all affect its truth; and that it is true is a point that admits of being very easily determined. For what, we would ask, is implied in a profession of Christianity? or what is to be understood as believed on the part of those who make such a profession? On the subject of man's moral well-being, they must be held as admitting that unless the sinner be reconciled and brought near to God by the blood of Christ, he must be in a state of enmity against his Maker, and exposed therefore to all the consequences of the divine displeasure; that unless he is in the way of progressively advancing towards a resemblance to God, and of being ultimately brought into a perfect conformity to the divine image, he must still be under the dominion of that debasing influence by which his nature has been degraded; and that unless he is looking forward to an eter-

nity of communion with his Maker, he must be destitute of every thing like a rational hope of blessedness beyond the grave. All this, I conceive, is necessarily implied in a Christian profession. The gospel is addressed to mankind as sinners—as creatures who have violated the law and incurred the displeasure of their Creator—as spiritually dead in trespasses and sins—and as not only unworthy but unfit for being admitted into the immediate presence of God; and the professed object of the gospel is just to apply a remedy to these evils—to redeem sinners from the curse of a broken law—to raise them from the death of sin to the life of holiness—and to provide that an entrance shall be ministered to them abundantly into the everlasting kingdom of their God and Saviour. Is it not obvious, therefore, that the man who believes in the reality of these evils, as attaching to himself individually, must feel that till he has found an efficacious remedy for them, nothing else can ever afford him solid or satisfying enjoyment? And is it not equally obvious, that when he does find this remedy provided in rich abundance in the gospel, the truths revealed there must ever after be the source of his purest and most permanent happiness? But can it be alleged with any truth, that such is the place which the gospel really occupies in the estimation of all who profess to believe it? On the contrary, are there not many

to be found maintaining such a profession, who have never had any distinct apprehension of the truths which the gospel contains, and who cannot venture to say that these truths have ever at any time, or in any degree, directly ministered to their comfort, or added any thing to the sum of their enjoyments? In confirmation of this melancholy fact, we may refer to the testimony of many who can still remember, that they were long satisfied with a name to live and were dead; that though they were frequently conversant with the sound of the gospel, and regular in the observance of its ordinances, it was still to them the least interesting of all subjects that concerned their own personal comfort; that though they would readily have given a formal assent to all the truths which have now been stated, they were in reality labouring to find happiness altogether independently of them; and that if they were ever conscious of receiving any immediate advantage from the gospel at all, it was little else than some such indefinite hope of the divine mercy as left them at liberty to pursue worldly objects with less dread, and to enjoy them with less scruple. A profession of Christianity, therefore, so far from uniformly weaning the affections from the world, may actually go to strengthen the hold which the world already has of the heart. Under the covert of that profession the sinner may be reposing in a deeper slumber of self-security, than he might otherwise

venture to indulge; and with all the decencies which have secured for him the name of a Christian among his fellow-men, there may be none that stand more in need, than he does, of being addressed in the language of the text.

But however obvious these considerations may be in themselves, it is very possible that the practical application of them may be evaded, even by those to whom they do most directly apply; and such persons may still flatter themselves, that they come not under the description of those with whom the prophet is here remonstrating. They may allege, perhaps, that the worldly pursuits in which they are engaged, and the worldly comforts which they enjoy, are such only as the divine law has sanctioned; that they act upon the principles of truth and integrity in the one, and carefully guard against sinful excess in the other; and that it cannot, therefore, be fairly said of them, when they freely enjoy the fruits with which the providence of God has crowned their industry, that they are "spending their money for that which is not bread, and their labour for that which satisfieth not."

In reply, then, I would observe, that what they allege about the lawfulness of their occupations, and of their enjoyments, may be all very true; but that this is not the point about which the present inquiry is concerned. As professing Christians, they must be held as believing

that, till the moment their reconciliation to God is sealed, there can be no true or permanent peace of mind for them, and that it is only from the gospel they can learn how this reconciliation is to be effected. The question, therefore, is, whether they have solemnly and deliberately given themselves to the determination of this momentous point? whether they have really learned the great and important lesson which the gospel is designed to teach them? whether they have distinctly seen, what is there set forth—the only true ground of a sinner's hopes? and whether it is on this ground that they have found a resting place where they can repose in peace, and from which they can look up to God as their reconciled Father? If this point has been determined, then they have experienced deliverance from the greatest of all the evils with which it was possible for them to be afflicted—the insupportable weight of unforgiven guilt; for this deliverance they will feel themselves indebted to the glad tidings of a free salvation, proclaimed to them in the gospel of the grace of God; to the same glad tidings they will continue to betake themselves as often as they stand in need of encouragement and consolation; and whatever, therefore, may be the amount or the variety of their other enjoyments, the principal ingredient in their happiness—that without which every gratification would be embittered, and every disap-

pointment aggravated—will be peace and joy in believing. But if, instead of this, they have been contenting themselves with some indefinite and indistinct hope of divine mercy; if, without having ever made their acceptance with God a subject of serious and solemn inquiry, they are giving themselves to the active pursuits of business, and the undisturbed enjoyment of its gains; if the doctrine of reconciliation through the blood of Christ, instead of being itself the well-spring of all their joy, is seldom thought of but when the stated period of religious exercises brings it formally before them as a matter of duty, or when it is employed to put down some rising suspicions that might embitter their other sources of enjoyment; and if they are contented thus to leave in a great measure unexamined, and altogether undetermined, the most momentous of all the questions that concern their well-being; then what is it but to say that they are choosing the world as their portion, "spending their money for that which is not bread, and their labour for that which satisfieth not?"

I am aware that, in urging this consideration, we may be accused of condemning, as sinful or unprofitable, the necessary pursuits and the innocent enjoyments of life. But there is no ground for the accusation. We have not said, nor do we now say, that these are either unnecessary or unlawful; for in fact we are speaking not of their

character, but of the place which they occupy in the heart and affections of those who pursue them. We do not hesitate, therefore, to admit that they may be just such as they would continue to prosecute, though they were to become at this instant all that a Christian should be; and so far from urging them to relinquish such objects of pursuit, we would say that even if they did so relinquish them, they would not thereby advance a single step towards the determination of the question in which their eternal well-being is so deeply involved. But it is equally obvious, on the other hand, that their persevering in them will do just as little towards the solution of that question; for however legitimate or laudable the objects of their pursuit may be, what has the prosecution or the enjoyment of these to do with settling the point of their admission into the divine favour, or their ultimate meetness for the enjoyment of the divine presence? They may indeed contrive to be satisfied with these: and with every accession that is made to their possessions, there may be a corresponding accession to the respectability and influence of their character in the sight of their fellow-men. But the relation in which they stand to God remains as it was before; they have made no approach whatever towards a state of reconciliation to him; and so long as this is their condition, they never can make any progress towards the perfection or the true happiness of their na-

ture. To turn away, therefore, from the considerations by which we would urge upon them the remonstrance in the text, on the alleged ground that we are denouncing as unlawful what is essential to the temporal well-being of themselves and others, is just an evasion of the great question which it most nearly concerns their eternal interests to determine; and it is still true, therefore, that, be their pursuits ever so laudable, or their enjoyments ever so rational, till this question be determined, "they are spending money for that which is not bread, and their labour for that which satisfied not."

I can very easily conceive that the remarks which have now been submitted may awaken some painful reflections in the minds of many, especially of the young and the inexperienced, and that the subject altogether may appear to them a very unwelcome and forbidding one. With the prospect of a long life, and the sanguine anticipation of many a pleasure on which they may reasonably calculate, and in which they may think themselves warranted to indulge, it will probably appear to them a very ungracious act on our part, to present to them vanity and vexation of spirit where they are confidently reckoning on so much of solid and satisfying enjoyment, or to allege, that, in giving the whole strength of their affections to objects which look so fair, and promise so well, they are "spending

money for that which is not bread, and their labour for that which satisfieth not." They will be ready to allege, perhaps, that we are making a very hard and unreasonable demand upon them, when we require them to make the serious and solemn question regarding their state towards God the chief subject of their concern; and that we are seeking to rob them of the better part of their enjoyments, when we would urge them, at so early a period of life, and before they have well begun to taste the pleasures of which they think themselves entitled to partake, to seek their chief happiness in the knowledge of God, and in a growing acquaintance with the Saviour's love. They may be disposed, therefore, to question the truth of our statement when we tell them, that disappointment will assuredly be the termination of every pursuit that serves to keep the heart and affections in a state of estrangement from God; they may allege, that it is yet too soon for them to become so serious, and so devout, and so mortified to worldly pleasures, as we would have them to be; and they may resolve, before they give credit to our representation of the unsatisfying nature of such pleasures, to give them another and a fairer trial. But I would entreat them to reflect on what grounds they are venturing on so hazardous an experiment. Can they reckon, with any security, on a single hour beyond the present? and if they could, will they

deliberately say, that they will try in the first place what the world can do for them, in the way of ministering to their permanent happiness, and that, if it fails them, then they will betake themselves to God? Were the representation which we have now made to them the result only of our own experience, and had we nothing else to say in support of it, but that we had made trial of the world, and had been disappointed, then they might have some grounds to hesitate upon receiving it. They might ascribe our failure to some error or accident which they may have the wisdom to avoid, or the good fortune to escape; and they might therefore, with some appearance of reason, claim the privilege of making the trial for themselves. But I would remind them, that the statement now set before them rests on a higher authority than any opinion or experience of a fellow-sinner. It rests on the faithful word of Him who declares the end from the beginning—who sees with infallible certainty the result of every pursuit in which every individual now present, either has engaged or will yet engage—and who has solemnly declared, that they who make any thing else than the divine favour the object of their chief concern, are labouring in vain, and spending their strength for nought. To say, therefore, that they are determined to put off the consideration of their eternal interests until they have secured all that can be had in the

way of present enjoyments, is just to say, that they will not credit the word of God until they have put it to the test of experiment; and it is to save them the agony of this bitter reflection that we would now urge them to "remember their Creator in the days of their youth, before the evil days come, and the years draw nigh, when they shall say, we have no pleasure in them."

But there is still another class of persons to whom our text naturally leads us to advert, though in many respects they differ essentially from those that have already been referred to. I allude to those who may have been so far convinced of sin, and the necessity of forgiveness, that they are not able to find in worldly things so much enjoyment as to banish certain uneasy feelings regarding their spiritual concerns, and who, in consequence of these fears, have set themselves, with some degree of anxiety and earnestness, to inquire in what way their conscience may be pacified, but who, from a misapprehension of the true nature of the Gospel, and especially of the doctrine of justification by faith in the righteousness of Christ, have gone about to establish a righteousness of their own. In their efforts to attain this object they may have subjected themselves to many a restraint, and submitted to the sacrifice of many a comfort; their temporal enjoyments may have been circumscribed within very narrow limits, and their reli-

gious duties may have been converted into a system of the most rigorous observances; and with every new act of mortification and self-denial, they may have anticipated an increase of spiritual joy, or an accession of strength to their hopes. But whether they have failed or succeeded in their attempt, it is unquestionably true, that they have been labouring in vain, and spending their strength for nought. If the former has been the result; if they find, that, in spite of all their efforts, their fears still prevail, and that, notwithstanding all their labour, they are still as far as ever from repose; then they have, in their own experience, a practical demonstration of the fallacy of their hopes, and of the impossibility of ever attaining to true peace of mind by any obedience of their own. We would tell them, therefore, that they have utterly misunderstood the very fundamental principle of the gospel; that the satisfaction which they have been virtually attempting to make to the divine law has actually been made in the person of the sinner's substitute; that on the strength of his righteousness they are required to rest their hopes of forgiveness; and that if they ever find the spiritual comfort of which they are in search, it must be in the free invitation of the context, "Ho, every one that thirsteth, come ye to the waters, and he that hath no money; come ye, buy, and eat; yea, come, buy wine and milk without money and without price." If, on the other hand, they have succeeded in

quieting their fears, and pacifying their conscience—if, by a more rigorous observance of religious duties, and a more circumspect course of life than they formerly thought necessary, they have come to the conclusion that now their condition is safe—and if they are contented to travel the round which they have thus prescribed to themselves, without any doubt or misgiving; then we would warn them that they have only exchanged one delusion for another, and that the peace which they have thus obtained will endure only so long as they are blind to the purity of that law which they have violated, and the extent of the satisfaction which it necessarily demands. Let them not suppose that by this remark we are making light of the reformation which their character may have undergone, or representing their amendment as useless or uncalled for. So far as their lives have been reformed it is well; but to say nothing of the difference, even in kind as well as in degree, between such a reformation, and that which follows the faith of the gospel, it is abundantly evident that the man who rests his hopes on such a partial amendment, is making the cross of Christ of none effect; and he will find, therefore, sooner or later, that in all the laborious servitude to which he has subjected himself, in the way of religious duties and observances, he has been "spending money for that which is not bread, and his labour for that which satisfieth not."

SERMON VII.

DANGER OF DELAYING TO SEEK THE LORD.

ISAIAH lv. 6.

Seek ye the Lord while he may be found, call ye upon him while he is near.

IT must have occurred, I think, to every one who has perused this portion of Scripture with any degree of attention, that in the words of the text the prophet's remonstrance begins to assume somewhat of a different aspect from what it presented at the outset. In the first and two following verses of the chapter, he appears in the character of an ambassador of the King of kings, entrusted with an embassy of peace to sinners, and commissioned to make to them proposals of reconciliation; and the language in which that embassy is delivered abundantly testifies, that the proposals which he tendered, so far from being longed for, or eagerly acquiesced in, were actually to meet with opposition on the part of those to whom they were addressed, and that they must have originated, therefore, in the free and unso-

licited compassion of the Sovereign, in whose name and authority he announced them. The very expression with which he introduces the subject of his divine commission, obviously implies that the persons with whom he had to deal neither cared for nor expected any such communication as he was authorized to make; the blessings of which he invites them freely to partake, were evidently such as they had never seriously contemplated as essential to the well-being of their nature; and the affectionate appeal which he makes to them, on the folly of spending money for that which is not bread, and their labour for that which satisfieth not, was a lamentable proof how blind they were to the guilt and misery of being in a state of alienation from God, and how certainly that alienation must have been perpetuated, had it been left to them to make the first overtures towards a reconciliation.

But there is a great deal more in the prophet's address than merely an intimation of God's willingness to be reconciled, as manifested in his having tendered to sinners, without any solicitation on their part, a free remission of sin, and in having placed at the acceptance of every one, even the guiltiest of them, all the blessedness which an intelligent and immortal creature can derive from the favour of his Creator. He urges his communication with such an earnestness of affection; he places it before them in such a variety of interest-

ing and attractive lights; he labours so anxiously to convince them, that his proposals, if accepted, would set them at liberty from that painful and protracted servitude, to which they were dooming themselves for a portion as unsatisfying as it was uncertain; and he puts these proposals on the ground of so plain and simple a proposition, as indicates the utmost unwillingness on his part to take any other reply than a cordial acquiescence on theirs. The whole tenour of his remonstrance exemplifies, in a way the most impressive and affecting, what an inspired apostle at a later period said of himself and of his fellow-labourers, "now then we are ambassadors for Christ, as if God did beseech you by us;" and whether we consider the nature of the prophet's embassy, or the importunity with which he solicits their attention to it, we can perceive nothing but the overflowings of a compassion which refused to abandon its deluded objects, and expressions of an endurance that was not to be wearied out with their perverseness.

But in the language of the text, the manner of the prophet's address undergoes a very obvious change. The admonition, "Seek ye the Lord while he may be found, call ye upon him while he is near," conveys a very solemn intimation, that there was a limit beyond which the divine endurance was not to extend; that the ambassadors, whom he honoured to be the bearers of his

gracious proposals, were not always to assume the attitude of supplicants with the impenitent and unbelieving; that the time would come, when he, who had made the first advance towards reconciliation with sinners, and had affectionately besought them to be reconciled to him, should cease to urge the proposals which had been so often rejected, and begin to withdraw from those who desired not the knowledge of his ways; and that, instead of being beset by invitations and entreaties to accept the overtures of his mercy, every thing about them should then give intimation that the Lord was weary of repenting, and that the measure of their iniquity was filled up. At the commencement of the prophet's communication, nothing appears but compassion and tenderness on the part of God, contrasted with ingratitude and perverseness on the part of sinners—the former affectionately proposing, and the latter as obstinately rejecting, a method of reconciliation, whereby a permanent intercourse might be established between them. But, in the words of the text, he who was formerly entreating, is spoken of as requiring to be entreated; sinners are urged humbly to solicit what had formerly been offered to them without solicitation; and they who had been called upon to hear that their soul might live, are admonished to call upon the Lord while he is yet to be found; nor can we doubt, that the prospect of such a termination of all his efforts

towards the conviction and conversion of the ungodly, imparted not a little of the energy and affectionate earnestness which characterize the prophet's address, " Wherefore do ye spend money for that which is not bread, and your labour for that which satisfieth not ?"

The transition which the prophet thus makes from the language of affectionate entreaty to that of the most solemn warning, must be obvious to every one, on comparing the words of the text with the first three verses of the chapter. A little reflection, however, will convince us, that so far from indicating any abatement of affection or tenderness on his part, or any qualification of the freeness with which he had previously urged upon his countrymen the blessings of pardon and reconciliation with God, that warning was most emphatically expressive of the divine compassion, and bore the most decisive testimony to the prophet's faithfulness, and anxiety for their welfare.

Though the invitations in the preceding context were originally addressed to the Jews of the prophet's own time, and were designed to reclaim them from that apostacy, whereby they were treasuring up for themselves wrath against the day of wrath and revelation of the righteous judgments of God; it is nevertheless evident from the passage itself, as well as from the preceding chapters, that they had a special reference to those among whom the Messiah was actually to

appear, and that for their admonition the remonstrance before us was, by the Spirit of God, directed to be put on record. The prophet accordingly proceeds, at the 4th verse, to set forth the Messiah as the author of all the blessings which he had previously described; as the faithful and the true witness, who should make known the words of eternal life to as many as believed on his name; and as the captain of salvation, under whose conduct and protection many sons were to be brought unto glory; and having thus, in beautiful accordance with the view which he had before given of the blessings of Messiah's reign, stated the great purpose of his appearing, he goes on, in the following verse, to foretel the triumphs of that reign, in the call and the conversion of the Gentile nations. "Behold," says he, "thou shalt call a nation that thou knowest not, and nations that knew not thee shall run unto thee, because of the Lord thy God, and for the holy One of Israel; for he hath glorified thee."

But while the prophet thus foresaw the coming, and foretold the conquests of Messiah, we have only to look back to his prediction of the sufferings and death of Christ, as recorded in the fifty-third chapter, to be assured that he foresaw also the reception which Messiah was to experience at the hand of the Jews; and from other passages of his writings as they have been interpreted by an inspired apostle, it is equally evi-

dent that the prophet was not ignorant of the bitter consequences in which his countrymen were thereby to be involved, when he in whom the Gentiles were to trust, should prove only a stone of stumbling and a rock of offence to the house of Israel, and the inhabitants of Jerusalem. To what extent he foresaw the blindness and consequent rejection of the Jews, we cannot indeed determine. But he assuredly foresaw enough to awaken his anxious solicitude about the calamity which he knew was to overtake them; nor can we conceive it possible that he should ever have contemplated the glory of Messiah in the subjugation of Gentile nations, without a painful anticipation also of what he had been commissioned to foretel respecting the infatuation and unbelief of the Jews. When, in the preceding context, therefore, he predicted the conversion of the heathen, and represented the nations which till then had never known God, as eagerly embracing the gracious invitations which were in the first instance addressed to the houses of Israel and Judah, we cannot doubt that it was with the view of intimating to the Jews that their impenitence and unbelief would one day transfer their privileges to the Gentiles; and while this supposition is confirmed by the solemn warning contained in the text, that warning does at the same time bear the most affecting testimony to the prophet's solicitude for his infatuated countrymen. It is

like a last anxious effort to rescue them from the calamity which he foresaw was to overtake them; it is in fact the very language in which he might have been supposed to address them, had he actually witnessed their final rejection of the overtures of the gospel; and while it neither qualifies the freeness, nor in any degree affects the faithfulness of his previous invitations, it adds unspeakable solemnity and force to his communication, inasmuch as it intimates that for any thing they knew, it might be the very last which it was befitting even a divine compassion to vouchsafe. Nor is the warning less expressive of tenderness and pity on the part of God, than of faithfulness and zeal in his servant; for, if after making them an unsolicited offer of a free forgiveness, and entreating them to accept that offer with as much earnestness and affection, as if their compliance had rather been a service to him than profitable to themselves; if after all this, they still continued unaffected and unmoved, then in what conceivable way could his compassion have been farther manifested, than by admonishing them, that the time was coming when the voice of this compassion must for ever cease? or what clearer proof could have been given of his unwillingness to abandon them, than the warning which the prophet was here commissioned to address to them, "Seek ye the Lord while he may be found, call ye upon him while he is near?"

Such appears to be the import of the text, as originally addressed to the Jews; and whether we view it as in the first instance alluding to the Assyrian and Babylonish captivities, of which we find so many solemn warnings in other parts of this prophet's writings; or whether we consider it as referring to the still more terrible calamity which overtook them in their utter subversion by the Romans, subsequently to our Lord's resurrection and the ministry of his apostles, none who are at all acquainted with the history of that people can fail to perceive, that in their case a very alarming intimation was conveyed in the words before us. But if it was befitting the character and perfections of God to deal with the Jews as the scriptures tell us that he did; if the honour of his government, and the rectitude of his law required, that he should cease to strive with the obstinately impenitent and unbelieving; and, if the principles of his holy administration are, like the infinite excellence of his nature, immutable; then his method of procedure with sinners, however diversified may be their external circumstances, must be essentially the same in every age: and if the former were admonished that the present moment was the only one on which they could reckon, as bringing with it the tender of pardon and reconciliation, it cannot be less necessary nor less seasonable for the latter to be addressed in the words of the text.

And in making this application of the subject, the admonition is not to be considered as merely implying, that they cannot calculate on any future period, as certainly affording them an opportunity, of embracing the proposals that are now made to them. It is abundantly evident from the history of the Jews, that the manifold warnings which were addressed to them by the prophets, who were successively employed to reveal to them the divine will, were intended not merely to tell them, that the divine forbearance must, at some period or another, cease any longer to suspend the execution of God's righteous and retributive judgments; but also to convey the solemn intimation, that the rejection of his proffered mercy must itself hasten as well as aggravate that retribution. And when sinners therefore are now admonished in the words of the text, they are thereby warned, not only that they may never have one opportunity more of accepting the offer of reconciliation, but that their rejection of it, at the moment it is offered, may be the very reason why another is never to be afforded them. Let it not be supposed, however, that by this remark we mean to attach any condition to the gospel itself, or to represent it, in any circumstances, as ceasing to proclaim the glad tidings of a free salvation, honestly placed at the acceptance of every human being who reads or hears it. Such a repre-

sentation would be to divest the gospel of its chief glory, to calumniate the character of God, and to leave the sinner without consolation or hope; and I feel therefore no little anxiety to guard against such a construction being put on the remarks that have already been, or may yet be submitted on the subject before us, as might lead to a conclusion so utterly abhorrent to the whole scope and spirit of the gospel.

When we speak of the impenitent and unbelieving Jews as having refused to seek the Lord while he was to be found, and to call upon him while he was near; when we represent the prophets as commissioned to warn them, that their obstinacy must sooner or later terminate in their being abandoned of that gracious God, who had so often manifested his unwillingness to give them up; and when we refer to the destruction of Jerusalem, and their dispersion among the Gentile nations, as the execution of the threatenings which they had so long despised, we are only stating what has been most clearly and impressively set forth in the word of God. But in stating all this, we say nothing to countenance the idea, that when the apostles relinquished, as a hopeless undertaking, the work of converting the Jews to the faith of the gospel, and directed their efforts to the heathen nations, among whom their labours were to be crowned with success, it was because the former had sinned beyond the efficacy of the Saviour's blood to

cleanse them, or because they had reached that point where, even if they had repented and believed the gospel, they would have found that with regard to them, its proclamation of peace and forgiveness had been repealed. And in like manner when we urge the admonition in the text on our fellow sinners now, and enforce it by the consideration, that it addresses to them substantially the same warning which it formerly did to the Jews, and intimates to them that there is a time beyond which impenitence and unbelief will not and cannot be endured; we are stating what we believe it was the mind of the Spirit should be stated, when our text was uttered and recorded. But to suppose that, in urging this solemn and momentous truth, we mean to say that there is a point in the history of any individual, beyond which the gospel, even if it were addressed to him, becomes so fettered and restricted by some peculiarity in his case, as that it ceases to be to him the tender of a remission; or that beyond this point we are not warranted to announce to him the glad tidings which it brings to others, is an idea which we disavow as not less dishonourable to the veracity of God, than ruinous to the hopes of man. Such an idea is as directly opposed to the unequivocal declarations of Scripture, as it would be subversive of the very office of a spiritual teacher; for what should be our condition if, when summoned as preachers of the

gospel, to minister to the spiritual disease of a hitherto thoughtless but now awakened sinner, it were a subject of calculation for human wisdom to decide, whether the thousand sins which his agonized conscience remembers, and the ten thousand which he has forgotten, may not have already placed him a hopeless exception beyond the reach of the pardon which it proclaims; and if it were necessary to determine this momentous question before we were warranted to announce to him the power and grace of the Redeemer? Such a case might indeed have occurred under a scheme of man's devising. But it is the very glory of the gospel, the brightest display of its divine and heavenly origin, the most decisive proof of its perfect adaptation to the necessities of our fallen nature, that it recognises no such conditions or limitations; that it puts into the hand of its ministers an unqualified warrant to make a tender of its blessings to all without exception; that they are authorized to carry to the death-bed of the expiring sinner the very message which, in the season of health, he had frequently heard, and as frequently disregarded; and that wherever they are met with the solemn question, "What shall I do to be saved?" they are in every case, and under every possible diversity of circumstances, furnished with the prompt and explicit reply, "Believe on the Lord Jesus Christ, and thou shalt be saved."

But though all this be true, and though it were a calumny on the gospel to represent it in any other light, still their is room for the admonition in the text, as intimating to sinners that the present is the only moment on which they can calculate as affording them an opportunity of entering into a state of reconciliation with God ; that though the gospel will ever be, what it now is, the proclamation of peace on earth, and good will to the children of men, they may, by their unbelief and growing insensibility, place themselves beyond the reach of being affected by it; and that their rejection of it at any given moment may be the very act whereby they are given up to that spiritual slumber, from which the invitations and remonstrances of the gospel shall never have power enough to awaken them. Such a state of spiritual desertion is not at all incompatible with what has now been advanced, respecting the freeness of the gospel salvation ; for, in point of fact it was exemplified in the very persons to whom the gospel was first preached, when the only effect which it produced, was to harden them in their impenitency and unbelief. " For in them," said our Lord, " was fulfilled the prophecy of Esaias, which saith, by hearing ye shall hear, and shall not understand, and seeing, ye shall see, and shall not perceive ; for this people's heart is waxed gross, and their ears are dull of hearing, and their eyes they have closed ;

lest at any time they should see with their eyes, and hear with their ears, and should understand with their heart, and should be converted, and I should heal them." The warning in our text, therefore, makes no encroachment whatever on the free grace of the gospel, inasmuch as the danger of which it gives intimation, consists not in any change that is ever to take place in the proposed method of the sinner's acceptance, but in the confirmed unbelief of the sinner himself; and so far from detracting from the solemnity of that warning, it is this very consideration that renders it peculiarly impressive and alarming.

Nor is it necessary to suppose, that when the sinner is thus given up to the dominion of a perverted will, and alienated affections, there must be some very palpable change in his external circumstances—some direct deprivation of the means of grace—or the visible infliction of some divine judgment, to give intimation as it were of the lamentable event. For very obvious reasons, there was such an interposition in the case of the Jews, when Jerusalem was delivered into the hands of the heathen; and when, in their national capacity, they were deprived of the religious privileges, by which they had for many ages been distinguished from all other nations on earth. But though the divine procedure is essentially the same in every age, there do not now exist the same reasons that there once did, for such visi-

ble indications of his immediate interposition even in the case of nations; and with regard to individuals, we have no reason to suppose, that at any period there ever was generally given such an intimation of their having finally rejected the proposals of divine mercy. Like every other threatening which the Scriptures have addressed to sinners, that in our text may be carried into effect in a thousand instances unperceived by us; and were it competent for us to decide upon the condition, or form a correct estimate of the character of one another, we might perhaps find, even among such as are professedly members of a Christian community, many who have already approached indefinitely near to a state of hopeless blindness and insensibility to the truth, and whose attendance on the ordinances of the gospel, is only ministering to the strength of that obduracy with which they have resisted its enlightening and sanctifying impressions. To detail fully the circumstances by which they have been brought into this state, or to describe the process of mind through which they have passed in reaching it, may indeed be impossible; for though unbelief is no doubt essentially the same in all, yet its manifestations will be found to vary with every diversity of character and external circumstances; and different individuals, therefore, may have arrived at the same unhappy state, by paths apparently very different. To some, the opposition

of the natural man to the things of God, may never have been roused into a state of activity, nor the truth felt to be so offensive, as to awaken any sensible resistance; and to such persons the gospel, from the frequency with which its sound has been repeated to them, may have neither meaning nor interest enough to awaken their attention, or engross their serious thoughts, even for the shortest period of time. In the case of others, there may have been frequent, and perhaps at times painful conflicts with truths which they could not well deny, but were at the same time most unwilling to admit; and if they have not been able to find refuge in a state of avowed infidelity, they may have succeeded in so frequently resisting the admission of the truth, and stifling the convictions which it was wont to awaken, that it may now have altogether ceased to disturb or alarm them. And with a third class, there may have been much ingenuity employed, to frame to themselves such a system of religious belief, as without directly questioning the authority of Scripture, may have so modified its truths as to divest them of all that is most offensive to the natural man, and thus to have rid themselves of the suspicions and fears which at one time they might occasionally feel, while giving themselves entirely to the pursuits of earthliness. In these, and in various other ways it is possible that the heart may be hardened through the deceitfulness

of sin; and who will venture to say, that this growing insensibility to the truth, is not the righteous retribution wherewith God is visiting the contempt with which that truth has been so frequently treated? that such persons are not approaching the state of obstinate impenitency where they shall be given up to strong delusion to believe a lie? and that there may not be exemplified in their case, the fatal consequences of despising the admonition in the text, of refusing "to seek the Lord while he may be found, and to call upon him while he is near?"

The cases to which I have thus referred are, I fear, of too frequent occurrence to leave any room for doubting their reality; and it is evident therefore, that the threatening implied in the prophet's admonition, and which was so fearfully executed in the case of the Jews, may be fulfilled in the bitter experience of multitudes, though there be no other visible indication of it than that settled indifference to divine things which accompanies a state of spiritual death, and from which neither the threatenings of the divine displeasure, nor the solicitations of redeeming love, are sufficient to awaken them. But neither are there wanting instances, in which the progress of sinners towards the unhappy state of which we are speaking may be, and I believe frequently has been, still more palpable; and where circumstances have occurred, which would appear to intimate,

that the proposals of mercy which had been often tendered, and as often disregarded, were so far withdrawn as to be less frequently made, and less powerfully enforced. It has often happened, for example, that individuals have, by the providence of God, been placed in a condition the most favourable for becoming acquainted with divine truth, where it was frequently brought before them as the most interesting and important of all subjects, and urged upon their attention by every consideration that could render it impressive and affecting; but it has often happened also, that they who have been so situated, have been dissatisfied with their condition on this very account, and have sought to make their escape from it, in the hope of getting quit of a subject, towards which they felt nothing but aversion and dislike. With this view, such persons have been known successively to withdraw themselves from situations where they could not avoid having the unwelcome topic frequently brought under their notice; and some who had been graciously arrested in their infatuated attempt thus to make their escape from the compassion and mercy which pursued them, have been heard to acknowledge, that, when after placing themselves in circumstances where they hoped to have been set at liberty from their former bondage, they found that they were still in contact with some who could not remain indifferent to their spiritual interests, they felt as

if they had been doomed to a most painful persecution, and longed for a condition where they should be altogether let alone on the subject of their soul's concerns, as for a state of permanent and undisturbed repose. These are matters of fact, and that they are of no rare occurrence is, I fear, but too evident, when we bear in mind, that many whose spiritual advantages in early life have been the greatest, are found at a future period to be pre-eminent in guilt even among their guiltiest associates. When such, therefore, as are seeking to make their escape from all thoughts of God and of spiritual things, are permitted to succeed; when their worldly schemes do so prosper, as to place them in the circumstances in which they longed to be placed; and when they find themselves not only removed from all that can remind them of divine truth, but surrounded with every thing that tends to strengthen them in their hostility against it; is there not something deeply alarming in that very success? Is it not like an intimation from providence, that God is about to withdraw himself from them, because they have sought to withdraw themselves from him? And does not the contemplation of such a state of spiritual desertion give unspeakable solemnity to the admonition of the prophet, "Seek ye the Lord while he may be found, and call ye upon him while he is near?"

In urging this admonition on those who have

never yet made salvation the one thing needful, nor deliberately chosen God as their chief good, I might enforce it by the consideration, that death may terminate their season of grace before that choice is made; and I might entreat them to reflect on the infatuation, as well as the guilt with which that man is chargeable, who amidst all the uncertainty which attaches to the present life, can contentedly delay for a single hour such a cordial acquiescence in the proposals of the gospel, as may give him a sure ground of hope for eternity; or who can avow, as he virtually does by such delay, that however important these proposals may be, there is something else in the meantime that must take the precedency of them in his estimation. But there is something if possible still more solemn in the reflection, that there may yet be before him years of growing indifference to God and eternal things; that he may live only to strengthen and mature the aversion which he already feels towards what is spiritual and divine; and that at last he may be found to have treasured up for himself wrath against the day of wrath and revelation of the righteous judgment of God. If there are any, then, who have received from the subject before us, or the remarks that have been submitted upon it, one serious impression, O let them beware how they suffer it to be effaced! and let them bear in mind that every conviction which has been suppressed

must necessarily render them more insensible to another. But let them also remember, on the other hand, that the gospel still addresses them in the same language that ever it did; and that the purpose of every such remonstrance as that which we have now employed, is to persuade them to listen to its gracious proposals. The warning in the text was employed by the prophet, to awaken the attention of his countrymen to the glad tidings which he had been commissioned to declare, nor can it ever be legitimately employed for any other purpose; and with all the alarming considerations which have now been suggested to mere nominal Christians, I would urge, even upon the most thoughtless and unconcerned, the invitation in the following context, "Let the wicked forsake his way, and the unrighteous man his thoughts: and let him return unto the Lord, and he will have mercy upon him; and to our God, for he will abundantly pardon."

SERMON VIII.

THE NECESSITY AND NATURE OF REPENTANCE.

ISAIAH lv. 7.

Let the wicked forsake his way, and the unrighteous man his thoughts; and let him return unto the Lord, and he will have mercy upon him; and to our God, for he will abundantly pardon.

In the preceding verse the prophet admonishes sinners to seek the Lord while he may be found, and to call upon him while he is near; and the words now read are obviously designed to explain and enforce that admonition. To seek the Lord, and to call upon him, are indeed very simple and intelligible expressions; and to such as have already been in any measure acquainted with the revelation of the divine character and perfections, they are fitted to convey a very clear and definite meaning. But it is evident, I apprehend, that the leading idea suggested by the context is the dangerous condition of those who have never set themselves seriously to seek the Lord; that the first thought which naturally occurs on reading it, especially when viewed in connexion with what

goes before, is the possibility of sinners arriving at that state of confirmed impenitency and unbelief, where the heart is hardened through the deceitfulness of sin; and that the primary design of the prophet in urging them to seek the Lord while he is to be found, and to call upon him while he is near, was rather to warn them of the danger of delaying this, than to explain what is implied in doing so. There was still room, therefore, and when we consider the proneness of mankind to misunderstand, or pervert, or disregard even the plainest and most important truths, we shall see that there was good reason also for a more explicit statement of what is meant by seeking the Lord, and calling upon him; and it must be evident to every one, that the words of our text are just such an explanation of these expressions as was required, and might have been expected.

In the prophecies of Jeremiah we find it said of the house of Judah and inhabitants of Jerusalem, "pray not for this people for their good; when they fast, I will not hear their cry; and when they offer burnt-offering and an oblation, I will not accept them;" a declaration which implies, that there may be a seeking of the Lord, and a calling upon him, either in the season of trouble, or under the painful forebodings of anticipated judgments, to which no answer is given; because being neither accompanied, nor followed up by a turning of the heart and affections unto

God, it can be regarded in no other light than as a prayer for permission to sin with impunity. It was necessary, therefore, to guard sinners against so daring a presumption; to warn them of the guilt and folly of supposing that they might safely pursue their own courses, and walk in the sight of their own eyes, in the hope that at last an appeal to the divine mercy will be heard, though made in despite as it were of every other attribute of his nature; and to show them that calling on the Lord is something more than a mere supplication for mercy, wrung from them by the agonizing fear of punishment, but breathing not one desire after the enjoyment of the divine favour, or conformity to the divine image; and this the prophet does when he addresses them in the words of the text, "Let the wicked forsake his way, and the unrighteous man his thoughts; and let him return unto the Lord, and he will have mercy upon him; and to our God, for he will abundantly pardon."

But the text is not less important as an enforcement, than as an explanation of the solemn admonition contained in the preceding verse. While that admonition intimates to sinners, that the time may come which is to seal their final and irrevocable separation from God, the text does as unequivocally assure them, that such a state of things never can be the effect of any change in the freely proclaimed salvation of

the gospel; that at every moment, it offers to every sinner who reads it, the full remission of all his offences; that no accumulation of guilt, considered in itself, can place the freeness of that offer under any restrictions or limitations; and that if the time ever comes, therefore, when they shall be beyond the reach of finding in it the words of eternal life, it will be because their insensibility has so gathered strength by their wilful indifference to its truths, that they have placed themselves beyond the reach of being influenced by its motives, or affected by its hopes. And is it necessary to observe in what an aggravated light this consideration places the guilt of those who continue, from day to day, treating the gospel as a matter of little, or at least of inferior moment, and one which may be deferred till the more important concerns of the present life being disposed of, they shall have leisure to give to it a larger share of their attention and regard? By such a delay they are not only deliberately subjecting themselves to the danger of which they are solemnly warned in the context, advancing in a way which, if followed out, must terminate in a state of final impenitency, and strengthening the reluctance which they feel to forsake it; but if, in the meantime, they be within the reach of the ordinary means of grace, they are chargeable with having at every step of their progress disregarded the invitations of a divine compassion; and if they

finally reach that state of confirmed unbelief, while the gospel is daily proclaimed in their hearing, it must be with the accumulated guilt of despising that mercy which, without qualifying its gracious offer with one new condition or limitation, continued to the last hour thus to address them ; " Let the wicked forsake his way, and the unrighteous man his thoughts ; and let him return unto the Lord, and he will have mercy upon him ; and to our God, for he will abundantly pardon."

The words of our text, then, may be considered either as explanatory of the admonition given in the preceding context, or as presenting the motive by which that admonition is enforced ; and to both views of the subject I would now for a little solicit your attention. And I observe, in the first place, that seeking the Lord while he is to be found, and calling upon him while he is near, implies, that the wicked man forsake his way. By the term wicked, as here employed by the prophet, we are obviously, I think, to understand a more openly depraved character than what is implied in the term unrighteous, in the next clause of the verse, inasmuch as it is his way, or outward manner of life, that the former is required to forsake ; while the latter is admonished to abandon his thoughts. And if so, then there are few perhaps who will not be ready to acknowledge the reasonableness, as well as the

necessity of this part of the prophet's requirement. If it be admitted, that repentance has any connexion at all with the future well-being of man, and there is perhaps no system of religious belief so loose as not to recognise this, it will be acknowledged to be necessary on the part of him whose life has been grossly and flagrantly at variance with the plainest declarations of the divine law; and were the question solemnly proposed to such a man, whether he has deliberately resolved to persevere till death in his present course of life, it would require a greater degree of hardihood perhaps, than is generally possessed even by the irreligious and profane, to answer in the affirmative. There is every reason indeed to believe, that among those who have received any thing like the elements of a religious education, or have felt, even in the slightest degree, those impressions of divine truth, which their intercourse with a professedly Christian community renders it almost impossible for them to escape, but who are nevertheless seeking their chief good in the pursuit of ungodly pleasures, there are few who have not secretly formed some vague and indistinct purpose of abandoning this pursuit at some future period, and of devoting a certain portion of the latter end of life at least, to the work of repentance and preparation for eternity. But for some such resolution as this, there are many whose conscience could not be reconciled to the

practices in which they indulge; and were it possible to trace the various steps by which such persons have progressively advanced from one degree of frivolous and guilty indulgence to another, it might be found, that the very circumstance which, on particular occasions, operated most powerfully in quieting their misgivings, and finally determining their fatal choice, was just some faint hope, or some indefinite purpose of a future change of life, on the strength of which they flattered themselves that, though for a season they were venturing on forbidden ground in the pursuit of happiness, they would quit it in good time to avert its fatal consequences, and that they should die at last very different characters from what they had lived.

It is thus, we fear, that with an infatuation which, but for the testimony of experience and observation, might appear almost incredible, multitudes delay the consideration of a subject to which they now feel a very strong aversion, with the indeterminate design of taking it up at some future period, when that aversion shall have been incalculably strengthened and confirmed. And is it wonderful then, that there should be so few, who, after a long period of attachment to the sinful and debasing pleasures of the world, are found, at an advanced period of life, accessible to right views, or sanctifying impressions of divine truth? It does frequently happen, indeed,

that such persons outlive their capacity for taking the active part that they once did, in the pursuit, or in the enjoyment of these lying vanities; and in such cases there may, and in fact there must be, a very great and obvious change in their external character and conduct. Their former follies may have entailed upon them an accumulation of irremediable evils, by which the last years of their mortal existence are to be embittered; disappointment and vexation of spirit may lead them to survey their past lives, not only with regret, but with something of self-condemnation; and if, along with these painful recollections, there should also be awakened some anticipation of an approaching eternity, their last days may be marked with a sobriety of conduct, and a seriousness of deportment, which form a striking contrast to the gaiety and thoughtlessness of their former life. But is it from the contemplation of an old age like this, that the votaries of worldly pleasure are gathering encouragement to persevere in their present course? Is this the amount of the resolution which they have formed of future repentance, and on the ground of which they flatter themselves that they may yet venture a little farther in sinful indulgence? And is it on the strength of such a change as we have now described, that they are reckoning on preparedness for a peaceful death, and meetness for a blessed eternity? Even on this partial reforma-

tion, the effect of necessity rather than of choice, they have no warrant to reckon. But though they could reckon on it; and though the change, when it does take place, should go a great deal farther than has now been stated; still it might not only fall immeasureably short of what is implied in the wicked forsaking his way, but might in reality make no approach whatever to the essential character of that regeneration to which the prophet refers. To forsake their way, it is not enough that the wicked—those who have been living in open and avowed opposition to the express requirements of the divine law—should relinquish the more flagrant of their sinful practices, and abandon the immoralities by which they may have outraged the decencies of a well-regulated society. The very way of such men—the general tenor of their lives and conversation—the whole course of their ordinary and every-day actions, is pervaded by a principle of ungodliness; and unless, therefore, that way has been brought under the controlling influence of an opposite principle; unless a reverential fear of the divine authority, and an affectionate regard to the divine glory, have assumed the chief place in the direction of their general conduct; and unless the enjoyment of the divine favour has engrossed the affections and desires, which were formerly expended on sinful gratifications; the mere relinquishment of pleasures which they are no longer

capable of pursuing, or the external observance of duties which they dare not any longer disregard, must leave them as much as ever estranged from God, and as unfit as before for the blessedness of his presence. And when we think then of the magnitude of the change implied in the words before us, how desperate is the hazard which those men run, who deliberately persevere in a course of life, where ungodliness is becoming more and more the confirmed character of their actions; and do so with the presumptuous idea, that they shall be able hereafter at pleasure so to change the whole course and design of those actions, as to impart to them the very opposite character.

To some it may perhaps appear, that we have been putting on the words of the prophet a more rigorous interpretation than he intended, and consequently than we are warranted to do. To meet the objection, therefore, I would observe, in the second place, that to seek the Lord while he may be found, and to call upon him while he is near, implies not only that the wicked forsake his way, but that the unrighteous man also forsake his thoughts. By this declaration, the prophet has overthrown that false refuge in which the sinner is so ready to seek shelter, when, on the ground of some partial reformation in his external conduct, he begins confidently to reckon on the forgiveness of his former offences, although

godly sorrow for sin, and a longing after conformity to the divine image, have had no place among the motives by which that reformation has been brought about. It is indeed a melancholy proof of the perverseness which cleaves to our fallen nature, that notwithstanding the express declaration of the divine law requiring us to love the Lord our God with all our heart, and with all our soul, and with all our strength, and with all our mind; we should act as if he would be satisfied with just such a measure of external obedience to the mere letter of his requirements, as we may find it convenient to yield; and that even after a long continued course of disobedience to these commandments, we should deem it enough that we have latterly, and at a period of our own choosing, again brought our outward actions into something like a conformity with his law. To suppose that there should be little or nothing spiritual, in the relation that subsists between the Creator and his intelligent creatures; that the manifestation of his own excellence and perfections should form no portion of the blessedness which is communicated on his part; and that the love and the imitation of that excellence should scarcely, if at all, enter into the homage which is paid on theirs, is assuredly a very strange delusion: and did we but reflect for a moment, we could hardly fail to perceive, that such an idea is not only opposed to the express declarations of

Scripture, but is actually condemned by the very principles on which we are daily acting towards one another. For where, we may ask, is the parent, who would be satisfied with the mere outward obedience of his children to the commands which he might lay upon them, or the wishes that he might express, if he knew, at the same time, that they entertained not towards him one sentiment of respectful esteem, or one feeling of affectionate regard? But is it not true, that something worse than the want of filial reverence and love towards God is the character of multitudes, who do nevertheless reckon on their final acceptance with him; and that, too, on the ground of certain qualities of heart, and virtues of life, which have had no direct reference whatever to the authority of his law, and the glory of his name? Are there not many, who, without being chargeable with any thing in their outward behaviour grossly at variance with the divine law, are cherishing affections and desires the most contrary to its spirit; and who would find, on a careful examination of the diversified thoughts and feelings which are successively passing through their minds, that the subjects which do most readily arrest their attention, and from which the soul is deriving as it were its chief nourishment, are such as are calculated to widen their separation from God, and to render them still more unfit for relishing that

spiritual intercourse with him, which constitutes the true blessedness of an intelligent creature?

But neither is it from those subjects only of mental exercise, which are in their own nature sinful, that the unrighteous man is required to turn away. The very circumstance of his habitually excluding God from his thoughts, does itself impart the character of ungodliness to the whole current of his thoughts, just as it does to the general tenor of his actions; for if he can find employment for all the active principles of his intellectual and moral nature, in almost every topic that is presented to him, even the most frivolous and unprofitable, while he can find nothing either to interest or gratify him in the devout contemplation of the divine perfections, in the solemn recognition of the divine presence, or in the comforting sense of the divine favour; then what is it but to say, that the whole bent of his heart and affections is away from God; that he is giving to other objects that homage of regard, which is due only to his Maker; and that he is dethroning his Creator from that supremacy, which it is his inalienable prerogative to hold over the affections of his creatures? Independently, therefore, altogether of the external conduct, sinners may be daily and hourly in a state of active rebellion against God; and whatever reformation the former may have undergone, so long as they can find no place for him in their thoughts,

or only such a place as indicates dishonourable views of his character, they must be held as among the number of those referred to in the text, " Let the wicked forsake his way, and the unrighteous man his thoughts."

Did the truth of these remarks require any farther proof, I might refer, in confirmation of them, to the next clause of the verse, where, after urging the wicked to forsake his way, and the unrighteous man his thoughts, the prophet adds, and let him return unto the Lord. It is by this expression, indeed, that he has marked the peculiar character of genuine repentance,—that repentance unto salvation which flows from a godly sorrow for sin, and which an inspired apostle has contrasted with the sorrow of the world which worketh death. Many circumstances, as we have already seen, may conspire to awaken in the sinner's mind painful regret for his former course of life; and the consequence of that regret may be a very palpable change of conduct, and as far as concerns the temporal well-being of himself and others, a very decided improvement in his general character. But with all the bitterness of such recollections, and all the severity of self-condemnation with which they are accompanied, there may be nothing of godly sorrow,—the sorrow which arises from the painful reflection that he has offended and dishonoured that being, whom he now sees to be infinitely worthy of his entire con-

fidence, his ardent affection, and most devoted obedience. On the contrary, it may be only an indication of a growing enmity to God—an expression of discontentment with that state of things, which has rendered it impossible for him to enjoy the pleasures of sin, without experiencing its bitter consequences—and a manifestation of the dread with which he contemplates that being whom he is conscious of having offended, but whom it is impossible for him to love, and hopeless for him to resist. And, in like manner, with regard to the reformation which his character has undergone, it may be both very extensive and very palpable; but it may at the same time indicate nothing like a deliberate preference of God, and devotedness to him, as a more satisfying and enduring good than the world and its pleasures; or such a change of heart, as leads him to place his chief happiness in a growing resemblance to God in this world, and the prospect of eternal communion with him in the world to come. On the contrary, it may be a reformation dictated by fear, and enforced by necessity; and though many a duty may be externally performed which was formerly neglected, and many a sinful practice relinquished in which he once indulged, it may only be because the sins which he abandons are no longer compatible with his present comfort, and because the neglect of the duties which he knows to be incumbent on him, cannot

now be reconciled with his apprehensions of futurity. But all this is a very different thing from returning unto the Lord—seeking, with the broken-heartedness of a penitent child, to receive the forgiveness, and be reinstated in the favour of an offended and most compassionate Father—and renouncing, as not only unprofitable but hateful, those sinful pursuits that have exposed him to the displeasure of God, and by which his affections have been alienated from all that is supremely worthy of his love and esteem; and the man, therefore, who contrives, by such a reformation as we have now described, to pacify his conscience, and to persuade himself that all the disorders of his moral nature have been rectified, is only exchanging one delusion for another—hiding from himself the true nature of his spiritual disease—mistaking insensibility to the pain, for the cure of the evil that afflicts him—and, exemplifying the declaration of the apostle, that "the sorrow of the world worketh death."

If such, then, be the magnitude of the change implied in our text, when it requires the wicked to forsake his way, and the unrighteous man his thoughts, how unhappy the condition, and how infatuated the conduct of those who deliberately persevere in their own way; and who flatter themselves, that having travelled their round of this world's pleasures, and being satiated with the enjoyments which it affords, they shall be able at

any time to effect that change upon themselves as far as it is necessary! and how powerfully does this consideration enforce the admonition in the context, "Seek ye the Lord while he may be found, call ye upon him while he is near!" And is the sinner, then, really required to effect this change upon himself, before he can look for pardon at the hand of God? Is the forgiveness of sin promised only as a reward to him who has thus forsaken his wicked way, and relinquished his unrighteous thoughts? And must the question of his acceptance with his Maker remain undecided, till he has completed his emancipation from the debasing influence of sin, and reinstated the divine law in the undivided sovereignty of his heart and affections? These are questions which a perplexed inquirer might naturally propose under his first conviction of the necessity of such a change, and after his first efforts to produce it in himself; for no man will ever make such an effort, under the impression that his eternal well-being depends on his effecting it, without very soon discovering that his condition is indeed a desperate one. As a moral and accountable creature, he is unquestionably bound to forsake sin and return to God; nor can he for one instant withdraw himself from the obligation, that rests upon him to do so; for it is the unalterable requirement of the divine law, that he love the Lord his God with all his heart. But it will re-

quire very little experience to convince him, that the moral inability to comply with this requirement which sin has entailed upon him, is not to be remedied by any effort of the will, which has itself been perverted; and they who have contended the longest and the most successfully with the inherent sinfulness of their nature, will be the first to acknowledge, that the condition of the sinner would indeed be a hopeless one, were his pardon and acceptance with God suspended, on his effecting such a transformation of his nature as is implied in the words of the text. The justification of the sinner, however, has not been placed on any such grounds; and it would be an utter misapprehension of the prophet's meaning to suppose, when he calls upon the wicked to forsake his way, and the unrighteous man his thoughts, and to return unto the Lord, that he intends to represent this change of heart and life as the reason why the Lord will have mercy, or as a work which he will reward with abundant forgiveness. It is evident in fact from the language of the text itself, that the very reverse of this statement is his meaning; that instead of urging repentance as that which is to procure pardon, he holds out the abundance of the divine mercy, and the riches of divine grace as a motive and an encouragement to repent; and that forgiveness is the *cause* therefore, and not the *effect* of the sinner's return to God, "Let the wicked

forsake his way, and the unrighteous man his thoughts ; and let him return unto the Lord, and he will have mercy upon him ; and to our God, *for* he will abundantly pardon."

Such, I apprehend, is the only sense in which the prophet's admonition can be understood without doing violence to the obvious meaning of his words, and setting them in direct opposition to the general tenor of Scripture, as well as to what the prophet himself had stated in the preceding context ; and in no other sense could they ever afford encouragement or consolation to the sinner. To hold out forgiveness to those whose wills are depraved, whose hearts are prone to earthliness, and whose affections are alienated from God and from divine things, only on condition that they rectify the perversion of their nature, correct the evil tendencies of their hearts, and transfer their affections from what is sinful to what is holy, would in reality be to say that they never could be forgiven at all. The first feeble effort which their fears might prompt them to make towards fulfilling these conditions, would convince them that it was a hopeless undertaking ; every succeeding attempt would only awaken the feeling that they were serving a hard and austere master ; and the spirit of bondage which this feeling must necessarily generate, would convert all their efforts into a system of painful servitude, calculated to strengthen, rather than

to subdue their natural aversion to God and holiness. But it is not on such a principle as this that the Gospel proceeds in the overtures which it proposes to sinners. It reveals God to them in a character fitted to disarm their opposition; it removes the objections which they might urge on the ground of hard or difficult terms, by the offer of a free forgiveness; it seeks to withdraw them from sinful pursuits, and to detach them from sinful associates, by the manifestation of a love infinitely more profound than they ever did, or ever can experience on the part of a fellow-creature; and while it calls upon them to repent, it is by means of considerations and motives calculated in their own nature to awaken repentance. "Let the wicked forsake his way, and the unrighteous man his thoughts; and let him return unto the Lord, and he will have mercy upon him; and to our God, for he will abundantly pardon."

It appears, then, that the words of our text are to be considered, neither as a mere authoritative mandate requiring sinners to return unto the Lord, nor yet as the statement of certain conditions on which alone they can be accepted; but as a representation of the change which it is essential for their own well-being that they undergo, and as presenting them with a view of the divine character calculated in its own nature to effect that change. And if such be the import of the

text, then in what an aggravated light does it place the guilt of those who remain unaffected by the considerations here presented to them! and how fearfully must their insensibility gather strength by every hour that they continue in a state of impenitence! We are well aware that the agency of the Holy Ghost alone can open their eyes to the glory of the divine character, and touch their hearts with a sense of the divine love; and it is this very truth that places in its most alarming light the obduracy of the carnal mind. But if this agency be employed, it is by means of the truth stated in our text; that truth is in itself a very plain and a very affecting one; and it is just while we are urging it, as the prophet has here done, that it may be made the channel for the communication of that divine influence, whereby the heart is to be subdued under an overwhelming sense of the love and mercy of God. None, indeed, who will give the subject one serious thought, can fail to perceive that it is a truth calculated directly and powerfully to affect the heart; and to this very circumstance may perhaps be ascribed not a little of that peculiar dislike which unregenerate men sometimes manifest, to the great doctrine of justification by faith in Christ. To general views of the character and perfections of God, and general admonitions on the subject of the homage and obedience which they owe to him, they may show no very

strong or marked aversion; because such statements make no demands upon them but what they can very easily contrive to evade, or at least so to modify as to render them neither very offensive nor very inconvenient. But to tell such men that Christ died for them—that he did so for this, among other purposes, that he might hold that place in their affections to which such infinite generosity entitles him—and that he is at the moment solemnly and earnestly entreating them to give him the love and affection which he has purchased; this is a statement which, if true, makes a demand upon them of which there can be no evasion; it shuts them up to the determination of the simple question, whether they will acknowledge his claim or not; and if it fail to melt and subdue, it will most assuredly irritate and harden them.

But offensive as the consideration may be, still we would continue to urge it; for if this truth fail to persuade the wicked to forsake his way, and the unrighteous man his thoughts, that saving change never will be effected by any other. They may indeed devise another scheme of justification, and they may satisfy themselves with offering to God a different kind of homage than the love and gratitude which Christ requires. But we would entreat them to reflect, whether in doing so, they are not virtually rejecting the most momentous truths in the divine revelation; and whether such a scheme must not terminate in

their rejecting the whole? It is there expressly said that Christ shall come again to receive his people to himself, that where he is there they may be also; that to those who overcome will he grant to sit with him on his throne, even as also he overcame, and is set down with his father in his throne; and that they shall sing a new song, "Thou art worthy, for thou wast slain, and hast redeemed us to God by thy blood, out of every kindred and tongue, and people and nation; and hast made us kings and priests unto God." If these declarations be admitted as the true sayings of God, then whatever modifications they may be made to undergo, this much at least is certain, that the blessedness of heaven comprehends in it, on the part of those who are admitted there, the habitual recognition of the divine presence, the devout contemplation of redeeming love, and the ascription of praise to him who sitteth upon the throne, and unto the lamb for ever and ever. The subject, therefore, from which multitudes here turn away as from something distasteful and offensive, is the very subject in which the spirits of just men made perfect find inexhaustible employment for all the faculties of their glorified nature; and is there not enough in this consideration alone to convince us, that until we have felt the constraining power of the love of Christ here, there can be no approach towards a state of preparedness for the enjoyment of his presence hereafter.

SERMON IX.

GOD'S WAYS NOT MAN'S WAYS.

ISAIAH lv. 8, 9.

For my thoughts are not your thoughts, neither are your ways my ways, saith the Lord. For as the heavens are higher than the earth, so are my ways higher than your ways, and my thoughts than your thoughts.

IT has been emphatically said by an inspired apostle, that the carnal mind is enmity against God; and there is no truth to which the conscience of sinners, if permitted to speak out, bears more unequivocal testimony. The statement, indeed, is expressed in very strong language, and there are probably few, even among those to whom it is applicable, who could bear to acknowledge in so many words, either to themselves or others, that they hate God. That statement, however, is nevertheless true of every man who has not experienced the transforming influence which accompanies the knowledge and belief of the gospel. Did such men but seriously think of God as constantly present with them,

and privy to their most secret thoughts; as making a demand upon them for the first place in their heart and affections as his inalienable right; as requiring them to give the enjoyment of his favour, and the hope of dwelling for ever in the presence of his glory, a decided preference to every other kind of gratification; and as solemnly assuring them, that nothing can contribute to their permanent happiness which is not contributing to their progressive growth in resemblance to him; they could not but feel that the character of God, when so viewed, is the object of their dread and dislike; that such a recognition of his presence and of his claims, would wither the strength of all that constitutes their most valuable enjoyments; and that if they could not contrive either to lower the demands of his law, or to shut out the recollection of these demands altogether, they could not think of him but with suspicion and fear.

It is possible, indeed, that they may contrive, in one or other of these ways, to suppress the painful feeling which a sense of God's nearness to them might otherwise awaken; and they may thus persuade themselves, that the apostle's statement, however true in the case of others, is not applicable to them. But they are, in fact, only concealing from themselves the object of their dislike, under an imaginary character of their own framing. Their apparent reconciliation to

the character of God as they would wish him to be, is perfectly compatible with an unsubdued enmity to him as he is; and the very contrivance, whereby they would endeavour to evade the charge which the apostle brings against them, is in reality an acknowledgment of its truth. Nor is it possible that it can be otherwise with those who are conscious that they have offended God, and at the same time suppose that it is by some self-denying effort of obedience on their part, that his displeasure is to be turned away, and his favour regained. The conviction that they have sinned, must be accompanied with the conviction that they have thereby made God their enemy; and if they believe that ceasing to sin can alone procure the forgiveness of their past offences, while, at the same time, their hearts are prone to what is sinful, they must not only regard him as an enemy, but as one whom it is almost a hopeless thing to attempt reconciling. Their fears, it is true, may prompt them to many a painful exertion, and some indistinct idea of divine mercy may urge them on to many a sacrifice of present gratification. But neither their hopes nor their fears will ever change the character of such constrained and unwilling obedience. It will still be felt to be the rigorous servitude which none but a hard and austere master could ever exact; a growing sense of the difficulty and extent of that servitude, will be accompanied with

a growing suspicion and distrust of him who requires it; and it will be found, that after all their efforts to satisfy the demands of his law, God is farther than ever from being the object of their confidence and affectionate esteem. There is thus, in the sinner's first conviction of sin, the commencement of a growing alienation from God to which it is impossible to assign any limits; the consciousness of every new offence, and the dread of the retribution that is due to it, go directly to widen the separation; and if reconciliation does not take place on the ground set forth in the gospel, the sinner, to escape despair, must take refuge in delusion. The latter, indeed, is perhaps the more frequent termination of such a struggle; and if multitudes are to be found who, without any distinct apprehension of the way of the sinner's acceptance, are nevertheless undisturbed by any disquieting fears respecting their spiritual state, and unconscious of any thing like a tormenting dread and dislike of God, it is because they have contrived so to conceive of his character, and so to interpret his law, as to find in their own obedience a ground of hope whereon they can quietly and securely repose.

Nothing, I apprehend, can be more obvious, than that something like this must be the refuge to which unregenerated men betake themselves, in order to escape the bitterness of a continued and painful conflict with the purity and rigour

of the divine law. It is but too evident indeed, from the anxiety which multitudes show to put a lax and indulgent interpretation on that law, that it is by some such contrivance they are seeking to conceal from themselves the true state of their affections towards God, and to persuade themselves that their hearts are right with him, while their enmity to his true character is unsubdued and unabated. If the service, therefore, which he requires, be a service of affection—if it be the sum and substance of his law, as he has himself declared it is, to love him with all the heart—and if the very blessedness of his intelligent creatures consists in paying him this homage; then how hopeless must be the idea of their ever reaching such a state, so long as they regard him in the light of an austere master who suspends the pardon of their offences, on their fulfilment of a painful and protracted servitude—a servitude which either goes directly to strengthen and perpetuate the alienation of their hearts from him, or must be evaded by their forming dishonourable conceptions of his character? Yet such is the ground on which sinners are actually disposed to place their acceptance with God; and it is chiefly as opposed to such methods of pardon that the prophet says, in the words of the text, "the Lord's thoughts are not our thoughts, neither are our ways his ways." In the preceding context he had called upon the "wicked to forsake his way, and the unrighteous man his thoughts, and to return unto the Lord;"

but knowing well that such a demand made upon guilty and alienated creatures, could only serve to strengthen them in that alienation, and that whatever external compliance with the letter of the divine law their fears might extort from them, their affections would be still farther estranged from God by the very efforts which they made to propitiate his favour; he goes on, in the last clause of the verse, to urge the only consideration by which he could ever hope to reach their hearts—the unsearchable riches of the divine mercy. "Let the wicked forsake his way, and the unrighteous man his thoughts; and let him return unto the Lord, and he will have mercy upon him; and to our God, for he will abundantly pardon."

It is no doubt true, that in the schemes which sinners form to themselves whereby to pacify their conscience, and whereon to reckon for the pardon of their offences, the mercy of God does occupy a place, and it may be a very prominent one too; and that after all the deductions which they can contrive to make from the holiness of the divine nature, and the purity of the divine law, they still find it necessary to draw largely on the compassion, or perhaps we should call it the indulgence of God, before they can silence some of the fears that will at times disturb their tranquillity. But it is obvious from the nature of things, and confirmed by the experience of every day, that what is in such schemes denominated

the mercy of God, is as dishonourable to his character, as it is destitute of any efficacious influence whereby to gain the affections of those who trust to it. For what is the amount of this divine attribute as they understand it? or what is the process of reasoning by which they bring their minds to a state of security and ease? They acknowledge that they come very far short of what the law of God requires them to be, if that law is strictly interpreted; but they take refuge in the reflection, that he is merciful and will not rigorously exact from them all that he is entitled to do—a plea which is neither more nor less than to say, that the law which would require from them, without any abatement, what they are unwilling to yield, would, in their estimation, be a hard and unreasonable one; and that he who enforces such a law must be any thing but the object of their affectionate esteem. Even though they should succeed, therefore, in persuading themselves in one instance that allowance will be made for their delinquency, and that, on this point, nothing more is required of them in future, than they have in time past been accustomed to pay; it is obvious that by such a method of showing mercy on the part of God, not one step is gained towards awakening love and affection on the part of sinners. The very next delinquency with which their conscience charges them, must revive in their minds the same sus-

picion and distrust as before; and unless they can again succeed in persuading themselves, that for this too allowance will be made, they must feel the requirement with which they have failed to comply, as the mandate of a sovereign at whose power they may tremble, but whose character they cannot love.

It thus appears that there is no limit to the deductions which, by such a scheme of pardon, are successively made from the integrity and spirituality of the divine law; and even supposing that these deductions are made, what is the condition in which sinners are thereby left at last with regard to the state of their affections towards God? Every new abatement of the rigorous enforcement of that law, is just granting them permission to withhold a portion of the love which they owe to him, and which it is the true blessedness of their nature to exercise; the allowances for which they plead, and on which they reckon, are just so many steps by which they are removed to a greater distance from a conformity to the divine character; and when they have succeeded in putting such an interpretation on his law as quiets all their misgivings, instead of thereby being brought to love him with all their heart, the true ground of their tranquillity and peace is the belief, that they are set free from the obligation of loving him at all. It is thus, that while mankind would invest the character of God with an

attribute of mercy, which goes to exclude almost every other perfection of his nature, they do actually circumscribe that very attribute, and divest it of every thing that can exercise an efficacious influence over the human heart; and it is especially as opposed to these erroneous views of the divine character that I would now direct your attention to the words of the text. "For my thoughts are not your thoughts, neither are your ways my ways, saith the Lord. For as the heavens are higher than the earth, so are my ways higher than your ways, and my thoughts than your thoughts."

I observe, then, in the first place, that God's ways are not as our ways, nor his thoughts as our thoughts, inasmuch as he tenders to us the forgiveness of all our offences, independently of any condition to be fulfilled on our part, in the way of satisfaction or obedience. And that such a method of reconciliation stands directly opposed to every scheme which human wisdom would have devised, is abundantly evident from the reluctance with which it is received, and the objections by which it has been assailed, notwithstanding the unequivocal language in which it is found stated in the Bible. By such a method it is alleged, the divine law makes a far more complete surrender of its authority, and a far more injurious compromise of its honour, than if the pardon of sinners were in some way, or to a cer-

tain extent suspended on their own obedience; and it is moreover alleged, that they are thereby set free from an obligation to obedience, and are even furnished with an encouragement to continue in sin, which does not attach to the scheme which we have already been considering. Both objections, however, originate in misapprehension. If by a free forgiveness, indeed, we were to understand such an act of mercy as should overlook or pass by the transgressions of sinners, merely on the ground of pity, and in the way of indulgence to what are termed the weaknesses and imperfections of human nature, and without being accompanied with any distinct expression of God's holy displeasure at sin; then it would assuredly be liable to the first of these objections, inasmuch as it would in reality be identified with the very scheme which, as we have already seen, makes the divine law successively relinquish every one of its requirements. It will be evident, however, on a very slight examination of the Scriptures, that this is not the acceptation of the term free forgiveness as held forth in the gospel. Though in as far as sinners are concerned, that forgiveness is in the strictest sense of the word free, being offered to them without the burden of one qualifying condition, and urged on their acceptance without money and without price; yet in as far as regards the divine law, it cannot be alleged that there has been any departure from the ut-

most rigour of its demands, or any compromise of its authority, when it is expressly declared, that if it assents to the acquittal of the offender, it is only on the ground that its honour has been vindicated, and its integrity maintained by the obedience and death of the Son of God. In placing forgiveness on the foundation of Christ's righteousness alone, to the entire exclusion of any partial obedience which the sinner might plead, God has in reality given us the most striking demonstration of the uncompromising rigour of his law; it is virtually to say, that as a righteous lawgiver, he could not treat with sinners on any other ground than that of a perfect righteousness; and a scheme of reconciliation therefore, which attaches any weight to what we may call obedience on our part in the pardon of sin, implies on the part of God a departure from that principle of rectitude which Christ died to vindicate and sustain. And with regard to the second objection, that a free forgiveness must prove an encouragement to sinners to continue in sin, I would just refer to that very objection as the most striking confirmation of the remarks that have already been offered respecting the tendency of the system which would place pardon on the righteousness of the offender; for what is such an objection but an acknowledgment on the part of those who urge it, that if they were freely forgiven, they would consider themselves free to sin—that

if there be any thing in their lives like a conformity to the will of God, it is still but a heartless and an unwilling servitude—and that whatever may be the mortification and self-denial to which their scheme of pardon may prompt them, it never will lead to the obedience of affection and love.

But it is farther to be observed, that there is a mighty difference between receiving a free forgiveness at the hand of God, and obtaining an exemption from our obligation to love him; and yet it is only on the supposition that the one necessarily involves the other, that the objection can have any force. It will be found indeed, as we have already seen, that they who labour to quiet their apprehensions of the divine displeasure, by such a measure of obedience as will warrant them to look for acceptance, must be virtually acting upon the principle, that their obligation to love God with all their heart may be dispensed with; inasmuch as the very exercise of mercy on his part, as they understand it, is nothing else than granting them permission to withhold this love; and it surely requires no argument to show, that the tendency of such a scheme must be directly opposed to every thing like a willing and affectionate obedience. But can any man who reflects for one moment allege, that such is the tendency of a free remission, granted to the sinner through the blood of the Redeemer?

It is just this doctrine in fact which does most powerfully and impressively inculcate our unalterable obligation to love God, not merely in the way of an authoritative mandate, which of itself might tend to strengthen, but never would subdue the enmity of the carnal mind; but by presenting the divine character in a light fitted to awaken our love, at the same time that it commands our most profound reverence: and they who believe this doctrine, and have found in it a refuge from the fears of an accusing conscience, will have in their own experience, a practical refutation of the calumny, that deliverance from condemnation, through the blood of Christ, has either strengthened their inclination to sin, or given them permission to sin with impunity.

But I observe, in the second place, that the declaration in our text is still farther manifested in God's manner of dealing with sinners; inasmuch as whatever be their condition and character when the gospel reaches them, the moment it does reach them, it presents them with this offer of a free remission, and invites them at the instant to partake of the peace and joy of being reconciled to their maker. It may perhaps appear that this proposition, if not actually a repetition of the former, is so necessarily involved in it, as hardly to require being formally announced; for if the forgiveness which the gospel proclaims be indeed free, then it is obvious, that at no period can the

sinner claim it as a matter of right, and that by no delay can he be better qualified or entitled to receive it. But though all this be true, still it may not be unnecessary to dwell for a moment on the consideration now stated, inasmuch as it seems to be sometimes lost sight of, even by those who professedly hold the doctrine of justification by faith in Christ alone. In conceiving of the doctrines of the gospel, and urging them upon the attention of sinners, human wisdom is ever in danger of obscuring the glory of divine truth; and it does not unfrequently happen, that the freeness with which it proposes its overtures of reconciliation, is encroached on by the cautious jealousy with which that wisdom would guard them from abuse. With the view, as it is alleged, of checking the presumption, or exposing the false hopes of hypocrites, the sinner has often had prescribed to him something like a preparatory work, as essential to his reception of the gospel; and has been taught to look with suspicion on the joy which its glad tidings have awakened, unless it has been preceded by certain states of mind and feeling, which are supposed to be indispensable evidences of saving faith. That mankind are liable to self-deception on every subject connected with their character and condition, and on none more so than on what concerns their spiritual interests, is no doubt true; and they can never, therefore, be too frequently reminded of the de-

ceitfulness of their hearts, nor too seriously urged to examine the ground on which they are resting their hopes. But if, in doing so, we interfere with the free grace of the gospel—if we introduce into its proposals any thing in the form of a condition —or if we prescribe to sinners certain qualifications as previously necessary to their deriving peace of conscience from believing it; then we are venturing to alter the method of procedure which God has adopted for recovering the alienated affections of his fallen creatures; we are obscuring the full manifestation of that truth which can alone dispel the suspicion and distrust whereby sinners are confirmed in their estrangement from God; and are thus attempting to effect a cure, before we have made a direct application of the only remedy by which it can ever be wrought.

It is in consequence, I conceive, of some such obscure apprehensions of the gospel that there are so many humble and dejected inquirers, who are laboriously seeking rest, but cannot find it; and who are looking forward to some future, and it may be distant period, for the enjoyment of the everlasting consolation, and good hope through grace, of which they are at the moment invited to partake. Such persons may be fully persuaded, that the righteousness of Christ is the only medium of reconciliation with God; and did they detect any lurking sentiment of self-righteousness,

or any disposition to attach value to their own doings, in the matter of their acceptance, they would be ready perhaps solemnly and honestly to disavow it. But they seem to take it for granted that the peace of believing is not to be experienced, till they have for a long time believed; they lay their account, as it were, with a certain period of painful fears and misgivings, as a discipline through which they are required to pass in their way to a state of comfort and repose; and they look to this repose as something that is in reserve for them, when they shall have accumulated certain evidences of their being in the faith. But we would put it to their experience whether it is not true, that a spirit of bondage is, in the mean time, pervading all the obedience which they are attempting to yield; that all their services partake more of the character of a painful and necessary effort, than of a work of faith and labour of love; and that even in their own judgment, the accumulation of the evidences that are to determine their faith to be genuine, is making but very little progress. Nor is it possible in the nature of things that it can be otherwise. By contemplating the joyful sense of the divine favour as a blessing that is not to be enjoyed till they have advanced a certain way in the divine life, they are reversing the established order of God's procedure in the economy of grace; they are transferring to a distant point of the course which Christians are to run,

what he has placed at the commencement, as essential to every one act of cheerful and affectionate obedience; they are shutting out from their straitened spirits, the only truth whereby their hearts can be enlarged to run in the way of the divine commandments; and they are laboriously striving to love God, and to confide in him, while they are wilfully obscuring to themselves that view of his character, which can alone render him the object of their confidence and love. Did they but reflect on the nature of the gospel, and on what they have already experienced, they could hardly fail to perceive, that if ever they arrive at a state of peace, however distant that period may be, the peace itself must be derived from what is offered to them now just as fully as it can be then—the freely proclaimed salvation of the gospel: and should that period ever arrive, they will then be convinced, that if they were long destitute of comfort, it was not because they were forbidden to taste it, but because of their own misapprehension of the way in which it was to be found; and because they overlooked, in one of its most important applications, the truth in our text, that "God's ways are not as our ways, nor his thoughts as our thoughts."

But I observe, in the third place, that the declaration in the text is very strikingly exemplified in the forbearance with which God deals with sinners; inasmuch as the gospel has fixed no li-

mit, in the present life, beyond which its gracious proposals to them are either qualified or finally withdrawn. This is a truth which bears upon it very unequivocal marks of a divine origin; for if we could conceive it possible that human wisdom might have devised a method of reconciliation, by the offer of a free forgiveness, it would still have deemed it necessary to guard that offer from presumptuous abuse, by fixing a certain limit within which it must be accepted or forfeited for ever. But what would be the consequence, had there been in the gospel any intimation of such a condition being annexed to its overtures? I believe the experience of every Christian will bear witness, that had he been met by such a statement when, under the conviction of sin, he first betook himself to the gospel for an answer to the momentous question, "what shall I do to be saved?" he would most assuredly have concluded, that he was the person whom that limitation was designed to except; and that this conclusion would certainly have sealed up the only approach, whereby one affectionate thought of God would ever have reached his heart. It is, no doubt, true, that multitudes have arrived at a state of hardened impenitency, and confirmed unbelief, where their conversion to God might, humanly speaking, be pronounced hopeless; and some, too, have been found, who, under the impression that they had sinned beyond the hope of forgiveness, have ob-

stinately resisted every attempt to press upon their acceptance the gracious proposals of the gospel. But is it necessary to observe respecting the former, that their final impenitency cannot be the effect of any change or limitation in overtures, which they had all along disregarded, and still continue to despise? And need we remark, with regard to the latter, that to refer to their case as a proof that the gospel may cease, after a given time, to hold out any hope of forgiveness, in consequence of its offer having been frequently rejected, is just to place their opinion in opposition to the express declaration of the gospel itself, and to calumniate its free grace, on the testimony of those who misapprehend or disbelieve it?

It appears then, that whatever sinners may make of the gospel, it is still true, that as often as they hear it, they hear a gracious invitation to "return unto the Lord, and he will have mercy upon them; and to our God, for he will abundantly pardon." They may, at that moment indeed be on the very confines of eternity; and the next may determine whether their impenitence is to be final. But still there is offered to them at that instant the full remission of the accumulated guilt of a lifetime; nor is the offer fettered by a single condition, any more than at the first hour that it was proclaimed to them. Our text, in fact, would seem to have been written for the very purpose of removing the suspicion which a

convicted sinner may feel, lest his return to God may be too late for him to find acceptance. In the preceding context the prophet holds out the assurance of pardon to the very men of whom he had before been commissioned to utter the most alarming predictions; and as if they had begun to question the possibility of their being forgiven, or to inquire on what ground he could assure them of a gracious reception, he adds in the words before us. "For my thoughts are not your thoughts, neither are your ways my ways, saith the Lord. For as the heavens are higher than the earth, so are my ways higher than your ways, and my thoughts than your thoughts." And have we not all had in our own experience, abundant evidence of the forbearance and long suffering patience of God? for were it possible for us to take a survey of our past lives, as they appear to his all-seeing eye—could we reckon up our offences, as they stand recorded in the book of his remembrance—could we see at once all their aggravations as they regarded ourselves, and trace all their consequences as they affected the moral well-being of others—and were we able to contemplate them as one great accumulation of guilt that yet remains to be forgiven; is there an individual amongst us who could bear to dwell on the appalling sight, or with whom it would not be a question, whether such guilt could be forgiven? Yet the blood has been shed that is adequate to the expiation

of the whole; he who shed that blood is able to save unto the very uttermost; and whosoever believeth on him shall not perish, but shall have everlasting life. This is the sum and substance of the gospel, and, when uttered in the hearing of the sinner, the proposal is distinctly made to him, whether he will believe in the value of this blood and experience its healing efficacy, or whether he will add to the amount of guilt which he has already contracted, the still more aggravated offence of rejecting the pardon of it all.

SERMON X.

THE NECESSITY OF REGENERATION.

EPHESIANS v. 8.

For ye were sometimes darkness, but now are ye light in the Lord.

It will readily be admitted by all who acknowledge the divine authority of the gospel, that if the Ephesians really were Christians, as the apostle believed them to be when he addressed them in the words of the text, their experience would tell them, that the language which he employed, strong and figurative as it was, did in no degree exaggerate either the misery of the condition from which they had been delivered, or the blessedness of the state into which they had been translated. Till the gospel reached them, they were utterly ignorant of every thing that it most nearly concerned them as immortal creatures to know—equally blind to the glory of the divine nature, and insensible to the true happiness of their own—and destitute of all that could either minister to their comfort amidst the afflictions of

life, or impart substantial consolation to them in the prospect of death. Nor did the misery of their state consist merely in their being ignorant of truths, the knowledge of which is essential to the well-being of man. That ignorance was necessarily accompanied with the misapplication of every intellectual faculty, and the perversion of every moral principle; the powers of their mind were not only wasted, but expended in active hostility to God; and the efforts which they made to extend the sphere of their enjoyments, could serve only to help on a growing debasement of character, and a growing incapacity for relishing any thing that can minister to the permanent happiness of an immortal spirit. Enslaved by a degrading superstition, which scarcely recognised in the divine nature any other superiority to their own, than the power of inflicting punishment, the moral government of the world must have appeared to them to be conducted on a principle of caprice at least, if not of malignity; the salutary restraints that have been imposed on the depravity of human nature, by connecting suffering with sin, would be felt as so many envious and unreasonable encroachments on their happiness; distrust, and suspicion, and dislike, must have entered largely into all their conceptions of the Supreme Being, as often as they recognised his interference in the affairs of the children of men; and if they did formally do him

homage, or seek to propitiate his favour by acts of religious worship, every such act was in reality an insult to his character, inasmuch as it could be regarded in no other light than as an attempt to purchase the liberty of dishonouring him and of debasing themselves.

That such was the condition of the Ephesians previously to the truth being preached among them, is evident from what the Apostle himself has said of them in a preceding part of his epistle. When from a state like this, therefore, they were brought to the knowledge, and converted to the faith of the gospel; when, instead of a capricious or vindictive tyrant, whose wrath was to be appeased by costly sacrifices, and who took pleasure in disappointing the hopes, and circumscribing the enjoyments of his creatures, they were taught to contemplate God as a being of infinite compassion, and unbounded beneficence; when they were made to see that in all their pursuits after happiness, and in all their attempts to propitiate the divine favour, they had been laboriously working their own ruin, and setting themselves in opposition to the eternal principles of rectitude and truth; when they were assured that the being whom they had dishonoured by their very services, and who possessed the power of vindicating his authority, to an extent which they had never conceived of, had given up his only begotten Son unto the death, in order to make way for the extension of

his mercy to them ; and when they were brought to perceive that all the afflictions and sufferings of life, which they once regarded as so many indications of malignity or caprice, were in reality the appointments of infinite wisdom—the chastisement of a compassionate father—and the discipline by which the children of God are trained to a meetness for glory ; is there any language adequate to express the magnitude of the change that must have taken place, in their intellectual and moral constitution, by such a discovery? It was in fact introducing them into a new state of existence ; it was removing the veil, as it were, which, to their eye, once hung over the moral administration of God ; it was showing them infinite wisdom and goodness presiding over a system of things where they formerly saw nothing but uncertainty and disorder ; and presenting to them, under an aspect entirely new, every thing that is essential to the present comfort, and the future well-being of man : and nobody, therefore, who is at all acquainted with the gospel, will venture to allege, that there was any thing more than the sober statement of a matter of fact in the Apostle's declaration, when he addressed them in the words of the text. " Ye were sometimes darkness, but now are ye light in the Lord."

But though every professing Christian will without hesitation acknowledge, that nothing is here said of the Ephesian converts but what was

in perfect accordance with their own experience, and that in fact no expression was sufficiently strong to convey an adequate idea of the moral transformation which they were conscious of having undergone; it would be reckoned by many, we suspect, a very exaggerated statement, did we venture to assert that the declaration in our text, is essentially true of every believer. There is probably no one portion indeed of divine truth, about which practical infidelity is more extensively prevalent, than that which refers to the nature and extent of the change that never fails to accompany the faith of the gospel; nor is there any thing that bears more decisive testimony to the blindness of mankind on spiritual subjects, than their contriving so easily to overlook, or explain away the strong and explicit language of Scripture, on the point to which we are referring. The condition of man as a fallen and apostate creature, is exhibited in every possible light that can convey to us the idea of misery and degradation; the most striking figures are employed to heighten the contrast, in point of state and character, between him who does, and him who does not believe the gospel; and the transition from the one state to the other is described in every conceivable variety of language, that can represent it as the greatest and most important change which it is possible for the moral constitution of man to undergo. Of sinners who have not experienced this

change, it is expressly said that they are lost—that they are by nature the children of wrath—that they are enemies to God in their heart and by wicked works—alienated from the life of God through the ignorance that is in them—dead in trespasses and in sins. Of such as have undergone this change, it is as explicitly declared that they are the children of God—that they are reconciled and brought near to him by the blood of Christ—that they are partakers of everlasting consolation and good hope through grace—begotten again to a lively hope by the resurrection of Christ from the dead, to an inheritance incorruptible, undefiled, and that fadeth not away. And in speaking of the change itself, the Scriptures represent it under the various figures of being born again—of passing from death unto life—of being delivered from the power of darkness, and translated into the kingdom of the Son of God—of being transformed in the renewing of their minds—and created again in Christ Jesus unto good works. These are very strong, and very unequivocal declarations; and it seems difficult to conceive how any man, who acknowledges the divine authority of Scripture, but who is not conscious of any thing approaching to such a change having been wrought in himself, can peruse them without some misgivings about his state, or some doubts whether he has yet understood or believed the gospel.

But strong and explicit as this language is, there is reason to fear, that among those who do profess to believe it, there are multitudes in whom these, and many similar statements to be found in Scripture, have never awakened any such doubts; and who are contentedly taking it for granted, that they have undergone all the transformation that is meant by passing from darkness into light, though they have never attempted to form to themselves any distinct idea of what is implied in either of these expressions, nor ever seriously asked themselves whether they have any meaning at all. Were the question put to them, they would not perhaps openly deny the necessity of such a change, nor allege that there is any thing extravagant in the language in which the Scriptures have described it. But if urged to state what is the precise idea that they attach to that language, it would be found that, as they understand it, the amount of the change which it is intended to express is too little to be estimated or distinctly defined; that if they do not deny the reality of it altogether, they are virtually regarding the Scripture account of it as a very exaggerated statement; and that it would be nearer their real sentiments on the subject at once to avow, that however true the declaration in the text might be of the Ephesian converts, it is not, and cannot be applicable to those who have been educated in a Christian community, and have never

professed any other than the Christian faith. This, indeed, is the only plausible argument by which it seems possible, for such as are conversant with the Scriptures, to evade the force of the solemn and explicit statements already referred to; and it is only on the supposition that by some such argument they do contrive to evade them, that we can account for the indifference with which these statements are perused. But however plausible the reasoning may appear, it is but a contrivance to explain away divine truth; the work of conversion, though outwardly less palpable and striking, is still the operation of the mighty power of God; nor has it ceased to be true of any Christian, that "sometimes he was darkness, but now is he light in the Lord."

Believing then, as we do, that the statement in our text is in reality true of all Christians—but fearing, at the same time, that it is practically denied by many who bear the Christian name—we would offer a few remarks for the consideration of those who may never have seriously inquired, whether the gospel has been to them what it was to the Ephesians; and who may feel it to be essential to their peace to avoid entering on such an inquiry. Were we only required, indeed, to determine the question, whether it be a doctrine of Scripture that mankind are by nature in a state of spiritual darkness, and that by the knowledge and belief of the gospel they are brought into a

state of light, we might rest the decision of that question on the passages already referred to; or if any farther proof were necessary, we might appeal to the whole scope and tenor of what the Bible has stated respecting the practical influence of the truth. This, however, is not precisely the point about which the unbelief referred to prevails. The persons of whom we speak do not deny, that where the gospel is not known, or not believed, there mankind must be in a state of darkness; and they will not hesitate to admit, that wherever a human being has been brought to relinquish the abominations of idolatry, and embrace the truths of revelation, there a moral regeneration has taken place, which no language is too strong to express. But the delusion consists in their supposing, that because they have never been idolaters, in the ordinary acceptation of that term—because there is no period of their life within their recollection, at which they were utterly ignorant of divine truth—and because they have never thought of questioning the divine authority, or abandoning the profession of the faith in which they have been educated, there has therefore been no room for such a change being wrought in their moral nature, as we find expressed in the words of the text: and though they might not go the length of alleging that they have inherited, as if by birth-right, a purer or a holier nature than is transmitted by idolaters

to their children, yet they are virtually taking for granted, that the religious knowledge which they have been gradually accumulating from their infancy, necessarily excludes in their case the possibility of any thing like a conscious transition from a state of darkness into a state of light. It is not enough, therefore, that we can enumerate from Scripture many other declarations equally strong and unequivocal with that in our text. The point in question is not to establish the truth of these declarations as originally applied; but to demonstrate the fallacy of the argument by which multitudes contrive to persuade themselves, that they are not to be strictly interpreted in their application to Christians now—to convince them that a great deal of religious knowledge may be acquired, and many correct speculative opinions concerning the truth entertained, while they are in reality blind to the excellence of divine things—and to show them that, with all the benefits of a Christian education, and all the respectability of a Christian profession, there may still be room for such a change being wrought upon them as would enable them to say, "we were sometimes darkness, but now are we light in the Lord."

We are aware, indeed, that no representation of ours can convey to such persons any distinct perception of the nature or the extent of that change; for the very evil under which they labour, and

which the Spirit of God alone can remedy, consists in their incapacity to conceive aright of the spiritual regeneration, which the gospel is designed, and, when believed, never fails to effect. It is not, however, from any want of evidence, and that too of the simplest and most satisfactory nature, if they are not convinced that the belief of the truth is something very different, both in its nature and in its effects, from that unresisting acquiescence in the commonly received opinions of a professedly Christian community, which frequently passes for the faith of the gospel; and could they be brought seriously to compare what they have themselves experienced, with what the Scriptures have stated respecting the believer, they could hardly fail, we think, to perceive something of that difference, and to feel some doubts whether they have yet seen any thing of what the apostle calls the light of "the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ."

The evidence, then, to which we would appeal, in proof of the proposition that the declaration in our text is true of every Christian, is just the experience of the very persons who are disposed to question it; and who, by the qualified sense in which they understand that declaration, do practically deny it. And in making this appeal, let them not suppose that we mean to charge them with any of the more flagrant and aggravated immoralities, which the apostle has enumerated

in this same chapter, as characterizing the avowed enemies of the gospel, and which he emphatically denominates the unfruitful works of darkness. We shall suppose that they not only acknowledge, but do actually feel the restraints which the Bible imposes on sinful indulgence; that in submitting to these restraints, they are conscious that they consult the dignity and comfort, and well-being of their nature; and that a sentiment of reverence and respect for the authority of Scripture does in many instances lead them to confine their gratifications within narrower limits than they might naturally wish, or even conceive it necessary for their happiness to do. We shall also suppose that they have never once thought of making it a question whether the Bible be the word of God, or whether it is for one moment to be put into competition with any other system of religious belief; that they feel it essential to their comfort and peace of conscience, to observe the ordinances prescribed by the gospel; that the observance of these is associated in their minds with feelings of solemnity and sacredness; and that in addition to all this, they not only abhor many of the vices by which human nature is degraded, but admire and practise many of the virtues by which human character is dignified and made respectable. But all this may be supposed, and still it may be true that they are in darkness. Their affections, though not

debased and polluted by an attachment to the more degrading abominations that are sometimes exemplified, may be wholly given to the world; the objects to which they cling as their chief good, and in which they are in reality seeking a satisfying portion, may be essentially opposed to what constitutes the true blessedness of the soul; and with all that they know and believe concerning God and spiritual things, the light which they seem to possess, instead of opening up to them a purer and more permanent happiness than any thing that the pleasures and possessions of this life can furnish, may be serving only to regulate or restrain the ardour with which these are pursued and enjoyed. And if they would only examine the matter, they would find that this is actually the case—that though they see in Scripture many truths which it is most important for them to know, and many requirements with which it is necessary for them to comply, they do not see any thing in the tender which it makes of the divine favour, and the representation which it gives of the blessedness of being reconciled to God, which they would deliberately choose as their chief good—that whatever value they may attach to the gospel, they would feel themselves very unhappy had they no enjoyment more valuable than that which flows from the belief of its truths—and that, provided they had no dread of the misery which they are told awaits the un-

godly and unbelieving hereafter, they could part with all the positive comfort which they have derived from divine truth, without feeling any sensible diminution in the amount of their happiness.

If such then be their condition, it is obvious that however elevated may be their sentiments, or however dignified their enjoyments, compared with the abominations to which the Ephesians were attached previous to their conversion to the faith of the gospel, these enjoyments are essentially the same in their nature. The knowledge of revelation may have refined their feelings, and, to a certain extent, purified their practice; but sensible objects still form the substance of all that they wish for, and all that they are capable of relishing. The attention which they bestow upon divine things is in reality a matter of necessity rather than of choice. If they are reconciled to that necessity, and feel that their enjoyments must be regulated with a reference to the things of eternity, it is much in the same way as they lay their account with many other limitations to their indulgence, which the present constitution of things has fixed, and which it would be useless to attempt removing. And if a vague hope of escaping the infliction of future punishment sets them free from certain fears and misgivings which would embitter their present gratifications, and enables them to enjoy temporal good things

with an easy conscience, this will be found to be the amount of all that the gospel has really done for them, in the way of directly augmenting their happiness. But can they suppose that this is all that is implied in the peace and joy which in the gospel are associated with believing? or that if the change which the Ephesians experienced had gone no farther than this, the apostle could have said of them, that they were light in the Lord? By such a change they would no doubt have made their escape from many an absurdity in matters of opinion, and have undergone, too, a great improvement in matters of practice; and in as far as the present life is concerned, their condition would have been unspeakably bettered. But with regard to all that constitutes the true and permanent happiness of their nature, as immortal beings, they would have been as blind as ever they were; they would have seen nothing in the divine character so attractive, nor any thing in the divine favour so valuable, as to take the first place in their estimation as a source of enjoyment; and however striking and palpable might be the revolution that took place in their external character, they would not thereby have advanced a single step towards a capacity for relishing spiritual and eternal intercourse with God.

In confirmation of these remarks, we might appeal to the conscience of unregenerate men them-

selves. We might ask them whether they have ever had any distinct idea of what is implied in the language employed by the writers of the New Testament, to describe the happiness of the Christian? and whether it is not true, that the benefit which they have derived from the gospel, if they are conscious of having derived any benefit from it at all, be not rather an indistinct hope of being exempted from the infliction of suffering, than any expectation of actual happiness? But whatever they may be disposed to admit or to deny upon the subject, the truth of the statement now given has been verified in the experience of multitudes who are willing to acknowledge it. Of those who do really believe the gospel, there are many who lived long, perfectly contented with just such a Christian profession as has now been represented—never once doubting that they were Christians—nor ever once supposing that there was any other kind of light, on the subject of divine things, than that which they were enjoying. The moment however that they set about seriously inquiring what it was that they believed, and subjected the foundation of their hopes, and the nature of the blessings hoped for, to the same scrutiny to which they were accustomed to subject every thing essential to their worldly interest, they discovered that they actually knew nothing on the very subject about which they had flattered themselves that

they had nothing to learn; that to come to a reckoning with God was a solemnity for which they were altogether unprepared; that what had hitherto passed with them for the belief of the gospel, was something too indefinite and indistinct to afford them any security or comfort; and that on every thing connected with their eternal well-being they were still involved in darkness, uncertainty, and doubt. They could look back perhaps on a long course of regular attendance on religious ordinances, and a life unstained by any very flagrant immorality. But recollections like these, whatever value they might once have attached to them, they now found to be a very unsafe foundation whereon to rest their eternal interests; and they discovered on inquiry, that the most momentous of all questions was just the one which they had been the least anxious to have satisfactorily determined. They found, that though they had acquired from the gospel such ideas of divine mercy as served to lay asleep their apprehensions, so long as they could contrive to make their eternal interests a matter of secondary concernment, God was still in reality the object of their suspicion and distrust; that whenever they experienced any thing like the solemnity of realizing his presence, these indistinct notions of his compassion could give them no confidence in approaching him; and that so far from having felt any thing really attractive in his cha-

racter, they had never distinctly conceived how the enjoyment of his favour could make them perfectly and permanently blessed.

Such, I believe, are the perplexities and fears which have often been found to succeed a very fair and self-complacent profession; and when such persons are brought to have peace and joy in believing, is there any language that can be more truly or appropriately applied to them than the words of the text, that "once they were darkness, but now they are light in the Lord?" With regard to the first of these conditions, we have already seen wherein their darkness consisted; and to believers, the second is equally obvious and intelligible. Awakened to a sense of their guilt and spiritual destitution, as exposed to the divine displeasure, which it is equally impossible for them to avert or mitigate, the gospel message assumes, in their estimation, an importance which they never before thought of attaching to it; they feel that they can no longer be contented with the general and indefinite ideas that they formerly entertained of it; it becomes essential to their peace, that they know distinctly on what grounds pardon is extended to the guilty; a mistake on this point they now see to involve the most ruinous consequences; and no assurance of less authority than the word of God himself, unequivocally expressed, and clearly understood, is sufficient to pacify their conscience and quiet

their fears. But reading in the Scriptures that Christ suffered, the just for the unjust—that he was set forth to be the propitiation for sin—and that whosoever believeth on him shall not perish, but shall have everlasting life; their fears are quieted—their weary souls repose on the word of God as a declaration that cannot deceive them—that word, from being little else than a subject of mere speculation, becomes experimentally precious to them—and they feel that now they possess something which, if they hold it fast, secures to them a full and satisfying portion.

But neither is the light, that has thus broken in upon them, confined to the one great point of their acceptance with their Maker. It illuminates to their eye the whole of the divine character and administration; it gives them an insight into the evil of sin of which they had never before conceived, and a confidence in the wisdom of God's dealings with them, which no degree or duration of temporal prosperity ever could have given them; they know now as a matter of experience, as well as a subject of speculation, that there is a happiness essentially different in kind from worldly enjoyments, as well as unspeakably higher in degree; and they begin to conceive, with some degree of clearness, how it is that a human soul may be perfectly blessed when removed to a state where the gratifications of this life are for ever at an end. The most indifferent, I apprehend,

can hardly fail to perceive that a change like this is indeed nothing less than a translation from darkness into light; and could they only be persuaded to examine what it is that they believe, and to what extent the subject of their belief is laying open to them the character of God, and directly ministering to their enjoyment, I know not how they could avoid doubting at least whether they have yet understood the import of the gospel message. The light which the gospel imparts, and the views which it opens up, wherever it is understood and believed, are too palpable to be confounded with the indistinct apprehensions of the mere nominal Christian; and though the believer may not recollect when and how it was that the first ray of this light reached him, he cannot fail to perceive that it never could have sprung up in himself. He must know enough of the perversion of his understanding, and the earthly tendency of his affections, to be convinced, that but for the attractions with which the gospel revelation has clothed the divine character, and to the glory of which the Holy Spirit has opened his eyes, he should still have continued in a state of alienation from God; and he will not hesitate, therefore, to acknowledge, that the declaration in the text is really true of all believers, that "sometimes they were darkness, but now are they light in the Lord."

SERMON XI.

THE MEANS OF REGENERATION.

1 PETER i. 23.

Being born again, by the word of God.

We have already seen, from what has been stated in the preceding discourse, that the change which the apostle here represents as having passed upon those to whom his epistle was addressed, is frequently spoken of in Scripture, and always in language most emphatically expressive of its magnitude and importance. The necessity, indeed, of some such change, is obviously implied in all that the Bible has revealed concerning God, and in every representation that it has given of the character and condition of man. Not only are mankind universally declared to be guilty before God, and therefore exposed to his righteous displeasure; but they are moreover represented as alienated from the life of God through the ignorance that is in them, as enemies to him in their hearts by wicked works, as dead in trespasses and sins; and if therefore the happiness of intelligent

and moral creatures be any way dependent on the favour and fellowship of their Creator, it is very evident that a most important change of character is absolutely essential to the permanent well-being of every individual of the children of men. On this principle we find the doctrine of regeneration taught by our Lord, and in the very language employed in our text, when he declared to the Jewish ruler, "except a man be born again, he cannot see the kingdom of God;" and while the doctrine was so expressed as to imply that it is true of every human being, he intimated that it was the doctrine also of the Old Testament Scriptures, when he added, "art thou a master of Israel, and knowest not these things?" In the writings of the apostles, we find the same truth frequently stated and in language equally strong both as it refers to the greatness of the change itself, and the necessity of its being wrought in every man who is to be made perfectly and eternally blessed. The great apostle of the Gentiles in his epistle to the Ephesians, addresses them as persons who had been raised from a state of spiritual death,—"for you," says he, "hath God quickened, who were dead in trespasses and sins, wherein in time past ye walked according to the course of this world, according to the prince of the power of the air, the spirit that now worketh in the children of disobedience;" and then, as if to prevent the possibility of its

being supposed that such language was applicable only to those who had been turned from the abominations of idol worship, he adds, "among whom also we all had our conversation in times past, and were by nature the children of wrath, even as others. But God, who is rich in mercy, for his great love wherewith he loved us, even when we were dead in sins, hath quickened us together with Christ. For we are his workmanship, created in Christ Jesus unto good works, which God hath before ordained, that we should walk in them." It were easy to multiply quotations of a similar import with these. But enough has been stated to show that the regeneration of sinners is spoken of in the text, just as it is everywhere else in Scripture; that the strongest language is employed, because the strongest can alone adequately express the nature and extent of the change referred to; and that the apostle says nothing of the Christians to whom he wrote, but what is true of believers universally, when he represents them as "being born again, not of corruptible seed, but of incorruptible, by the word of God, which liveth and abideth for ever."

If such, then, be the magnitude of the change spoken of in the text; if it is set forth in Scripture under the expressive figures of a new creation—a turning from darkness unto light, and from the power of Satan unto God—a passing from death unto life—a being born again of in-

corruptible seed; and if it is moreover represented, as we formerly endeavoured to show that it is, not merely as taking place in those who had at one time been involved in all the darkness of a debasing superstition, but as a change which is common to all who shall be heirs of salvation—that, in fact, which is essential to the Christian character; might it not be expected that there would be something about those who have assumed the name of Christians, sufficiently decisive to testify that this change has passed upon them? It is a truth, however, about which I fear there is no room for dispute, that with multitudes who belong to a professedly Christian community, the case is very much the reverse; and there is reason also to suspect, that the vagueness and want of reality which, in the conceptions of many, attach to the whole subject, are not a little strengthened by the very consideration which ought to convince them, that the change is a most decisive as well as a most important one. That change, as appears from many passages that might be referred to, is represented in Scripture as the work of the Holy Spirit; and were we required to place in the most striking light, the reality and magnitude of that spiritual transformation, which every man is represented as undergoing, who is brought to the knowledge and the belief of the truth, I know not how we could more emphatically express both, than just by saying, that it is

the effect of a divine agency, a transformation wrought by the mighty power of the Spirit of God. In appropriating this work to himself the Holy Ghost who dictated the Scriptures, has intimated to us in what way we are to interpret the language in which the regeneration of sinners is there spoken of. No room is left for supposing that when it is called a new birth, or a new creation, it is merely a figurative expression descriptive of that external reformation of character which may frequently take place, where there is no corresponding change in the state of the heart and affections. As the work of the Spirit of God, it must be a renovation of the soul, extending to all those desires, and affections, and principles of action, which go to constitute the true character of a rational and accountable creature; and when it is spoken of, therefore, as a transition from death to life, a putting off the old, and putting on the new man, which after God is created in righteousness and true holiness; so far from supposing that such language is to be understood with any qualification, it is evidently the only language fitted to express what can only be effected by the divine agency of the Holy Spirit.

But though provision has thus been made for preventing such expressions being misunderstood or explained away, and for assuring us that the language, strong as it is, cannot exceed what is really implied in the change which it sets forth;

yet there is reason to fear that the doctrine of divine influence, or that which represents the conversion of the sinner as the work of the Holy Ghost, is the very consideration which has rendered multitudes unwilling to admit the necessity of such a change, at least to the extent which the language of our text would seem to imply. It is in fact a doctrine peculiarly offensive to the natural man, not only as being fatal to that self-complacency with which he contemplates the resources which he thinks he has in himself, and by the right application of which he believes he can become all that it is necessary for him to be; but also, and especially I suspect, because it implies the necessity of a closer and more immediate transacting with God, than the carnal mind can bear to contemplate or conceive of. The general proposition indeed, that the influence of the Spirit is in some way or other concerned in the formation of a virtuous character, may be admitted, just as there may be a general acknowledgment of God's overruling providence, where there is no lively impression of his omnipresence. But it is obviously with many, a very revolting thing, distinctly to recognise that influence in any particular case; and if they cannot, therefore, persuade themselves, that what is said in the Scriptures respecting regeneration, refers only to the case of those who have been the votaries of idolatry, they must be held as alleging, that the lan-

guage of Scripture expresses a great deal more than it means, when it declares, as in the text, that believers "are born again of incorruptible seed;" and elsewhere that "except a man be so born again, he cannot see the kingdom of God."

But there is reason to believe that the doctrine which refers the regeneration of sinners to the agency of the Holy Spirit, is often but very vaguely and indistinctly conceived of, even by those who would not willingly be thought to question its truth. It is but too evident that, with many, there is a disposition to rest satisfied with the mere acknowledgment of it as a truth generally, without any serious conviction that it must be a matter of experience as well as of opinion, while others expect from it to be made the subjects of certain impulses or impressions, the nature of which they could not perhaps very well explain; and that both classes are conceiving of the Spirit's influence, as of something that cannot be distinctly or certainly determined. There is no ground, however, for such an opinion. Had the Scriptures, indeed, merely told us, that except a man be born again, he cannot enter into the kingdom of God, and that the Holy Spirit is the agent by which this change of character is wrought, we should in that case have been left in much darkness, both as to the nature of that change, and the means by which it is produced. But the declaration of the apostle in the text,

goes directly to remove all such uncertainty. That declaration does not indeed explain, nor is it possible for us to conceive, how the influence of the Spirit operates on the soul; for "as the wind bloweth where it listeth, and we hear the sound thereof, but cannot tell whence it cometh, and whither it goeth; so is every one that is born of the Spirit." But however unsearchable may be the nature and the manner of the Spirit's agency, the text intimates that the method of his dealing with us is a very distinct and intelligible one; that his influence operates through the medium of certain communications which he has addressed to us, as directly, and with as much plainness, as one human being can address another; that these communications consist of certain truths of the most momentous import, to which we are required to give our serious and reverential attention; and that wherever these truths are clearly understood, and cordially embraced, it will be found that there the spiritual transformation has taken place which the Scriptures speak of so frequently and in such emphatic language.

Such, I apprehend, is the import of the apostle's declaration, that believers are born again by the word of God, and it is in perfect accordance with many other statements to be found in the Bible. "It is the Spirit that quickeneth," said our Lord to the unbelieving Jews, who had mis-

understood his doctrine, when he represented himself as the bread of life, " the flesh profiteth nothing: the words that I speak unto you, they are spirit, and they are life." " If ye continue in my word," said he on another occasion, to certain Jews who believed on him, " then are ye my disciples indeed; and ye shall know the truth, and the truth shall make you free." The same doctrine we find stated by the apostles also, and in language equally explicit. " I write not these things to shame you," says Paul to his Corinthian converts, " but as my beloved sons, I warn you. For though ye have ten thousand instructors in Christ, yet have ye not many fathers; for in Christ Jesus I have begotten you through the gospel." " Every good gift," says the apostle James, " and every perfect gift, is from above, and cometh down from the Father of lights, with whom is no variableness, neither shadow of turning. Of his own will begat he us with the word of truth, that we should be a kind of first-fruits of his creatures." And the apostle John declares that " whosoever believeth that Jesus is the Christ, is born of God."

It appears then to be the plain and uniform doctrine of Scripture, that the word of God is the incorruptible seed of spiritual life in the soul; and this doctrine goes directly to remove all that indistinctness of apprehension which, with many, attaches to the subject of divine influence, and in

consequence of which it too frequently remains a subject of mere speculation. It virtually tells us, that to conceive of the influence of the Spirit as of something that is to come upon us, and to work in us a change of character, independently of any truth being addressed to us, which is fitted to enlighten the understanding and affect the heart, is to expect an operation, which, however possible as a mere act of power on the part of God, is one which he has given us no warrant to look for. And, on the other hand, it intimates to us, that to occupy ourselves with inquiries into the nature and mode of the Spirit's influence on the soul, is to expend our time and our thoughts about what is infinitely beyond our reach, to the neglect of that which claims our immediate and most anxious attention. The point in which we are directly and most deeply concerned, is the meaning of the divine communication which has been made to us in the Scriptures. In that communication, truths have been propounded to us, which it is of eternal moment to us that we understand and believe; it is to open our eyes to the meaning, and our hearts to the love of these truths, that the influence of the Holy Spirit has been promised; in that very promise a most urgent demand is made upon us, to make them the subject of our serious, and humble, and persevering study; and if this influence is vouchsafed, it is to bring us to know, and conceive of, and

love the divine character as it is revealed in the Gospel; or, in the language of the text, we are "born again by the word of God, which liveth and abideth for ever"—even that "word which, by the Gospel, is preached unto us."

Such, I conceive, is the place which the apostle's statement assigns to the word, in the regeneration of sinners; and could we exhibit a faithful delineation of the character of believers, and contrast it with what they were while in a state of ignorance and unbelief, it would be made to appear very evident, that, in being brought to understand and believe the gospel, as the Spirit of God designed that it should be understood and believed, they have undergone a change equal in magnitude to all that is implied in the language of the text. A very little reflection indeed must satisfy us, that the cordial reception of the truth necessarily implies an entire transformation of character on the part of him who so receives it—inasmuch as he is thereby brought to entertain views, and act upon principles directly opposed to those which he formerly entertained and acted upon. No man who has carefully examined his own heart, or has been accustomed attentively to observe what is taking place in the world around him, can be ignorant, that, besides propensities and desires that are positively sinful, as seeking gratification in what the divine law has expressly forbidden, there is a proneness in every man

towards worldly objects and pursuits, which goes to exclude divine things altogether from the mind; and that, in his natural state, a regard to the divine glory finds no room among the motives which excite him to active exertion, nor the enjoyment of the divine favour any place in the schemes of happiness which he conceives or prosecutes. He may have heard enough, indeed, of divine truth to prevent him from openly and deliberately treating it as a cunningly devised fable; the influence of education, or the force of example, may have imposed it upon him as a necessary duty, to observe the form of acknowledging God and doing him homage; and he might be visited perhaps with certain misgivings of heart, some undefined dread of an unseen power whereby all his enterprises might be defeated, did he wilfully lay aside the formalities of a religious profession. But while he does externally retain these formalities, and might even be shocked at the idea of open and avowed infidelity, he could as little bear to have his soul wholly and habitually possessed with a sense of the divine presence; and, instead of seeking to realize fellowship with his maker in the ordinances of religious worship, he can tolerate these ordinances only so long as they make upon him no urgent demand to give to God the chief place in his heart. Though he may professedly acknowledge that he owes all his security and comfort to the

divine goodness, it is absolutely offensive to him to be told of the infinite depth of the divine love, as manifested in God sending his only begotten Son to die for sinners, and of the love, and gratitude, and devotedness, which are hereby claimed from them in return. He is labouring, in fact, to think as little, and to conceive as vaguely as possible of the truths that are brought before him in the gospel; and if he does enjoy any measure of peace or happiness, he enjoys it, not in consequence, but in spite, of all that he has heard of God and of divine things.

Nor is it necessary to suppose, that the sinner who is in the condition now described has succeeded in banishing all thought of spiritual concerns. Of death, and of the judgment that is to follow, it may be impossible for him to be habitually regardless, and when the subject does force itself upon his attention, it will be necessary for him to form some scheme or other, however indefinite or indistinct it may be, whereby to quiet his apprehensions, or rather to dismiss the subject of his fears. But what the nature of that scheme will be it is not difficult to discover. He will endeavour to sooth his disquietude by reckoning up the number of his virtues, and endeavouring to palliate the guilt of his offences; and if he can make it appear to his own mind, that he does not suffer by a comparison with others around him, but stands at least on a level with the great body

of mankind in similar circumstances with himself, he will conclude that he may safely reckon on the mercy of God overlooking or remitting those sins and imperfections which, as he supposes, partake more of the character of weakness than of guilt; that is to say, he will reckon on being received into favour and fellowship with him whose presence he could never bear to realize, and to whom he never paid any other than the constrained homage of fear. To say nothing, therefore, of the inconsistency of such a scheme of forgiveness with the moral attributes of the divine nature, and the principles of the divine government, there is no conceivable kind of happiness to which he can look forward in the future life; for, even supposing that the decision of the judgment day were in his favour, what satisfaction or comfort would there be to him in the prospect of spending an eternity in the immediate presence of God—that being whose true character was the object of his dislike, and whom he could not bear solemnly and seriously to think of, except in so far as he could contrive to conceive of him as altogether such an one as himself?

These remarks will be found, I am persuaded, to be substantially true of every unregenerate man; and of such a man, therefore, it may be said, that his sentiments on every point connected with the divine character, and the permanent

well-being of his own nature, stand directly opposed to the judgment of God. Let us suppose then, that the same individual is brought to understand and believe the gospel, and let us contemplate the change in sentiment and state of mind which is necessarily implied in the reception of its truths. He is there told, on the testimony of God, that he is a lost, a self-destroyed creature, exposed to the displeasure of his Creator, and lying under a sentence of condemnation which infinite rectitude requires shall be executed; that, if it has not already been carried into effect, he is indebted for the respite to the forbearance and long-suffering patience of God; and that all the schemes of happiness which he has formed, and all the enterprises in which he has engaged, will not only prove abortive, but must leave him at last wretched, and miserable, and poor, and blind, and naked. If, therefore, he believes this as a divine testimony—if the truth of it has been so deeply impressed upon his conscience as to convince him that such is really his character and state, it is impossible that he can remain contented or at ease in such a condition; the world must cease from that moment to hold out to him the promise of a satisfying portion which it once did; and, instead of being any longer satisfied with a general indefinite hope, that peradventure God may have mercy on him, he will feel it to be essential to his peace, not only that

he should clearly perceive on what ground a sinner may be accepted with his maker, but that the way of acceptance should be set before him on the authority of the same testimony whereby he has been convinced of his guilt. The gospel then does assure him that there is a way of acceptance. It tells him that God so loved the world as to give his only begotten Son, that whosoever believeth on him may not perish, but have everlasting life; that the divine rectitude being thus manifested, and the divine displeasure at sin unequivocally expressed, a free remission has been proclaimed through the blood of Christ; and that they who come unto God by him shall in no wise be cast out. And if these truths have also been brought home to his understanding and his heart—if he has been made to perceive the glory of the divine character as it stands revealed in the gospel, and the reality of the divine love as manifested in the death of Christ—if he has been convinced that the blessedness of his nature must arise from the enjoyment of the divine favour, and conformity to the divine image—and if he feels that he can confide in the efficacy of Christ's blood, as having sealed his reconciliation to God, and in the faithfulness of Christ's promise to make him meet for the inheritance of the saints in light; it is evident that his great concern must be how he may most frequently, and most vividly realize the presence of God; and that whatever may be the

nature or the number of his worldly comforts, the great source of his happiness, and that which gives value to every other blessing, must be the actual enjoyment of communion with God here, and the lively hope of dwelling in his presence hereafter. This, I am aware, is but a very general and a very imperfect view of the change which accompanies the knowledge and belief of the truth. But it is enough to show, when contrasted with what we have already seen of the natural man, that the change is a very great and a very palpable one; that the whole frame and constitution of the mind, from being in a state of opposition to the judgment of God, is brought into a state of agreement with it; and that the man who has undergone such a change is indeed "a new creature"—that he "has passed from death unto life," and has been "born again of incorruptible seed by the word of God, which liveth and abideth for ever."

It thus appears that the language of the text, both as it refers to the necessity and extent of regeneration, and as it regards the means whereby it is effected, is confirmed by experience; and as this regeneration never fails to accompany the faith of the gospel, reason is given to expect, wherever a profession of that faith is made, that its fruits will appear in all holiness of life and conversation—just as there is ground to suppose, that

those who make such a profession, are conscious of the operation of divine truth on their own soul, assimilating them to the divine image, and bringing them into a state of submission to the divine will. I fear, however, that in the case of many by whom the gospel is professedly believed, the reality of such a change as our text speaks of, is neither very evident to themselves, nor very clearly manifested to others. It will probably be said, indeed, that the operation of the truth may have commenced at so early a period, or its progress may have been so gradual, as to prevent its being so distinctly traced as in the case of those who have been suddenly turned from darkness unto light; that such a process is very likely to be of frequent occurrence among those who have received a religious education, and have been familiar with the Scriptures from their infancy; and that the change, therefore, may not be the less real, though they are not conscious of having made such a transition as the Apostle speaks of in the text. There is reason to fear, however, that a great deal of delusion often lies concealed under such an idea. I certainly do not mean to deny, that the commencement and the progress of the divine life in the soul may be very different in different individuals. The Spirit of God is not to be limited in his gracious operation; and I do firmly believe that multitudes have been sanctified from a very

early period—so early as that they cannot recollect ever being strangers to an affecting sense of redeeming love. But I would remind those who are disposed to allege the possibility of such an imperceptible transformation in their own case, that the time and manner of their conversion unto God, cannot affect the influence with which the truth now operates on their heart, or the place which it now holds in their estimation. If they believe the gospel, it will still be to them glad tidings of great joy, however long they may have been familiar with its truths; the hopes which it inspires, and the prospects which it opens up to them, will take the precedence in their estimation of every other object of interest or pursuit; and it will not fail, moreover, to bring forth in their lives the peaceable fruits of righteousness. If they are conscious then that it occupies no such place in their thoughts, and exercises no such influence on their hearts—if, instead of being the well-spring of their joy, and the source of their most substantial consolations, it ministers not in any sensible degree to their enjoyments —if they are comforting themselves with the thought that they believe the gospel, while they contentedly remain strangers to the comfort which the gospel itself imparts to every one who believes it—and if they are satisfied with giving a portion of their time to the regular, but cold and formal observance of the appointed methods of

Christian worship, while the strength and energy of their minds are wholly given to the world and its concerns; then to what purpose are they applying the gospel but just to sooth themselves into a state of security, and to shut out the suspicions that might disturb them in their temporal pursuits? The supposition that the work of the Spirit, in regenerating the soul, may begin at a very early period, and may advance by imperceptible degrees, will avail them nothing, so long as it is but too evident that in their case it has not begun at all; and it will be found, I fear, that such a plea is just one of the many subterfuges to which the deceitful heart betakes itself, in order to evade a question which it is afraid fairly to meet, and deliberately to decide on.

That such is the purpose for which the argument referred to is frequently employed, will be acknowledged by many who were themselves at one time accustomed to urge it. But it cannot be so with the man who sees in the gospel the repeal of that sentence which had consigned him to eternal death, and has felt the constraining power of the love of him who died as his substitute, and lives as his surety. He knows that it is by the influence of the Spirit of God that his eyes have been opened to see, and his heart to love the truth as it is in Jesus; and it is to the same divine influence that he looks for more enlarged discoveries of the character and perfections

of God. But he knows also that this divine teaching is something else than an inexplicable impulse, conveying impressions which he does not understand, or awakening hopes, the foundation of which he does not perceive. He feels that his comfort, and peace, and joy, do not arise from thinking that he has been regenerated, but from the precious truth, by the instrumentality of which his regeneration has been effected. That truth, it is essential to his comfort, as well as to his progress in holiness, that he habitually remember; he is conscious that he could not relinquish it without relinquishing every thing that is valuable to him as an immortal creature; he must be frequently turning to the contemplation of it, as the charter of all his privileges—the strength and nourishment of all his hopes; and it will not fail to appear, as often as his true character is brought into view, that through this truth there has been conveyed to him the impress of the divine image—that "he has been born again, not of corruptible seed but of incorruptible, by the word of God which liveth and abideth for ever."

SERMON XII.

PEACE OF MIND NECESSARY TO CHEERFUL OBEDIENCE.

PSALM cxix. 32.

I will run the way of thy commandments, when thou shalt enlarge my heart.

THERE are probably few who can require any formal definition to convey to them an idea of what is implied in the expression enlargement of heart. It is an expression, indeed, that hardly admits of being formally defined; and were we required, therefore, to explain its import, as descriptive generally of a certain state of mind or feeling, we should choose to do so by an example, not only as the readiest way of bringing its meaning fully and vividly before the mind of such as have felt what it implies, but as the most likely method also of conveying some apprehension of it to those whose experience may not furnish them with a very ready or distinct explanation; and for such an example we need go no farther than to some of the ordinary occurrences of every day life.

By way of illustration, then, let us suppose that an individual is involved in difficulties and embarrassment on the subject of his temporal concerns—anxious to retrieve his circumstances, but unable to bear up under the growing pressure of unsuccessful enterprises and disappointed hopes—struggling to diminish the weight of debt which is ready to overwhelm him, but finding that, in spite of all his efforts, it continues to accumulate—and seeing nothing before him but the prospect of spending his future life, and exhausting his remaining strength, in laborious but vain attempts to reach a state of independence, comfort, and repose.

And what may we conceive to be the feelings of a person circumstanced as we have now supposed? Is it not obvious that he must be labouring habitually under the weight of mental depression—that he must, in a great measure, be shut out from the enjoyment which, by the constitution of our nature we are fitted for deriving from the active exercise of our mental and bodily powers—that he must look forward to the business of every new day as a heartless enterprise, promising nothing but a repetition of the fatigue and exhaustion of the preceding—and that, if no prospect of relief is opened up to him, he must at length give way to a feeling of utter hopelessness, and cease to make even those efforts which, in more encouraging circumstances, he might

still have had strength and fortitude to put forth? Let us suppose, then, that, in this condition, events should occur to relieve him from his embarrassments; that the obstacles which stood in the way of his reaching a state of worldly comfort and independence, and which he once regarded as insurmountable, were removed; and that there were opened up to him the prospect of being able, by activity and diligence, to secure a competent portion of the temporal good things wherewith the providence of God is wont to crown the exertions of honest industry. And what, I would ask, must be the effect of a deliverance like this, on the state of his mind and feelings? Would it not be to lift from his straitened spirit a depressing load of anxiety and care? Would he not feel as if delivered from a weight that deadened all his energies, and paralyzed all his efforts? And would he not enter with alacrity, and cheerfulness, and vigour, on the very pursuits which he formerly contemplated only with dejection and despondency? Every man who has experienced any thing approaching to such a change of circumstances as we have now described, will recognise the state of mind referred to as accordant with what he has felt; and we would say, therefore, to such a man that he has, in his own experience, an explanation of what is implied generally in having the heart enlarged.

But while we may thus gather from the ordinary concerns of life, and from the change of feeling that accompanies certain changes in external circumstances, illustrations of the expression in our text, considered as descriptive of a particular state of mind; it is possible that we may still be ignorant of the import of that expression, as understood and employed by the Psalmist in the passage before us. Even in the case of those who have actually experienced, to the full extent of all that has now been stated, the enlargement or lightening of the heart which never fails to accompany the removal of embarrassment and perplexity in worldly concerns, there may be no experimental acquaintance with it as applied to spiritual things, nor any distinct apprehension how such a state of mind should produce the effect which it was found to do in the case of the Psalmist. The unrenewed man, in fact, cannot understand what sort of enlargement of heart that must be, which would prompt any one to run the way of the divine commandments. Such a man, it is true, may at times have felt that the requirements of the divine law are more rigorous than he is willing to comply with, and that the thought of death, and judgment, and eternity, is a heavier load on his spirit than he is well able to sustain. But the relief which he seeks, and which he may succeed in obtaining, is a very different thing from the enlargement of

heart of which the Psalmist speaks. While he is seeking his chief good in worldly possessions, and sees nothing, therefore, worth the expenditure of his strength and energies but the pursuit of worldly objects, his great concern must be, how he may most easily suppress the misgivings which will at times disturb his peace at the thought of the retribution that awaits him, and how he may most speedily make his escape from reflections which would awaken the suspicion, that there is something hollow and unsatisfying in the enjoyments on which he has set his heart. Could he be persuaded to entertain these reflections, and to give himself to the examination of his spiritual state, with the determined purpose not to relinquish his inquiry until he has arrived at a satisfactory conclusion on the subject; he would very soon find, that he is still at an immeasureable distance from that righteousness, on the ground of which he could look with confidence to an acquittal at the tribunal of God; and that there is a length and a breadth in the divine law, of which he had never before conceived, but which it would then be impossible for him to contemplate without apprehension and dismay. But feeling, that, to come so closely into contact with divine things, is in reality to dry up the well-spring of all his present enjoyments; that the anxiety which such an examination would awaken utterly disqualifies him for

relishing the only gratifications which he believes can minister to his happiness; and that every step he advances in the inquiry plunges him deeper in perplexity and distress; he is glad to make his escape from it by compromising matters with the divine law; and, by reckoning largely on the general mercy of God, he contrives to sooth his conscience by just such a measure of compliance with the letter of that law, as may lay him under the least possible restraint in the pursuit or enjoyment of his favourite objects. It is upon some such principle as this that the worldly man must be habitually acting; and whatever, therefore, may be the enlargement of heart which he has experienced in having his apprehensions quieted, instead of prompting him to run the way of the divine commandments, it consists in his having contrived to put so lax an interpretation on these commandments, as not to require any painful or self-denying effort in complying with them, nor to interfere with the pursuits to which he is giving the whole strength of his heart and affections.

It is thus, we fear, that multitudes are every day contriving to evade the most interesting and momentous of all the questions that ever engaged the attention of intelligent and accountable beings, and contentedly living without any experimental acquaintance with that spiritual emancipation which the Psalmist was longing after,

when he uttered the expression in our text; and just because they have never allowed their spiritual concerns to take so firm a hold of their mind, as to awaken any permanent anxiety, or serious doubt on the subject. But let us reflect for a moment, what the state of such persons would be, were they brought to inquire, and to perceive what it is that the divine law really requires of them. Let us only conceive of them perusing the summary of that law as expressed in the words of our Lord himself, "thou shalt love the Lord thy God with all thy heart, and with all thy soul, and with all thy strength, and with all thy mind; and thou shalt love thy neighbour as thyself;" and then giving themselves deliberately to compare with this requirement the ordinary state of their affections, and the general tenor of their lives. And what, we may ask, would be the result of such an inquiry? Is it possible that they could rise from it with the same complacency and satisfaction with which they had commenced it? Could they, even with all the partiality with which a man may be supposed to pass judgment on himself, come to the conclusion that this law they had uniformly kept from their youth up? And, on the strength of this verdict of self-acquittal, could they return with the same light-heartedness as before to the pursuit or the management of their worldly concerns? On the contrary, would not their con-

science bear witness at the first announcement of this law, that they were guilty? Would they not be compelled to acknowledge at the very outset, that the ordinary state of their hearts and affections was very different indeed from what this plain and unequivocal commandment required it to be? Would they not find, on inquiry, that in as far as a reverential and affectionate recognition of God is concerned, he had not till that instant been in all their thoughts? Would they not be constrained to acknowledge that at no one period of their existence could they honestly say, that God had been, even for the shortest time, the supreme object of their love? And would not the inquiry lead directly to the conviction, that by thus shutting him out of their thoughts, independently altogether of the actual violation of particular precepts, their whole life had been one unbroken course of rebellion against the authority and prerogative of their Maker, as entitled to the homage of their submission and gratitude?

It is possible, indeed, that, to escape this alarming conclusion, they might betake themselves to the subterfuge of attempting to qualify or explain away the meaning of the commandment, and endeavour to persuade themselves that, when it comes to be acted upon as a rule of judgment, it will not be interpreted and applied so rigorously as it has been expressed. But to say

nothing of the gratuitous assumption implied in this opinion, a moment's reflection could hardly fail to convince them, that the plea can avail them nothing. The ground on which they stand condemned, is not that they have come short of that obedience which the law in its strictest interpretation exacts, but that they have never made any, even the most distant approach towards yielding such an obedience at all; and to say therefore that they expect it to be so qualified as to overlook their imperfections, and treat their short-comings with indulgence, is in reality to say, that they expect it will be abrogated altogether. And what must be their state of mind when brought under a conviction like this? Must they not feel that they are lying under a burden too heavy for them to bear—that when once awakened to a right view of their spiritual concerns, perplexity on that subject is unspeakably more distressing than embarrassment in their temporal pursuits—and that the utter overthrow of every worldly hope would be a matter of little moment compared with that of being abandoned, without hope of relief, to a state of spiritual destitution? And even supposing that they are brought to see and feel the reasonableness of the law which requires a creature supremely to love and honour its Creator—that they are convinced of the folly as well as the guilt of having so long withheld this homage—and that now they are

willing and anxious to pay it by an uniform and devoted obedience; still would they not feel discouraged and depressed so long as they are in any doubt how the guilt which they have already contracted is to be dealt by, or whether it can be forgiven? and would they not then understand practically how it is, that he only whose "heart has been enlarged, can run the way of the divine commandments?"

Such is the state of mind to which we can easily conceive the sinner to be brought, when his eyes are opened to the spirituality and extent of the divine law; and it is a state that has been actually realized in the experience of multitudes. We may venture indeed to say, that it will be found to accord with the experience of all who have been convinced of sin, but who have not been made distinctly to see on what principle it is that sin may be forgiven; and are therefore labouring under perplexity and misapprehension respecting the ground of a sinner's hope, and a corresponding uncertainty on the subject of their own acceptance with God. In many cases they may see clearly the way of duty as pointed out by the divine law, and may feel strongly their obligations to pursue it; they may have no disposition whatever to question its reasonableness, or to quarrel with its rigour; and they may set about the performance of duty with a sincere desire to discharge it well, and not without the

hope, perhaps, that, when they have done so, they will reap the reward of quieted apprehensions, and a pacified conscience. But successive disappointments will soon teach them that they have mistaken the safe ground of hope, and the true source of consolation; and they will find that peace of mind is not to be purchased by any efforts of theirs, however laborious or persevering they may be. So long as self-righteousness enters, in any shape or degree, into their calculation in determining the question of their reconciliation to God, that question must remain in a state of painful and perplexing uncertainty; and every new discovery which they make of the exceeding breadth of the divine law will serve only to augment their suspicions and their fears. Their condition in fact will bear a striking resemblance to the supposed case of difficulty and embarrassment in worldly concerns, by which we endeavoured, at the commencement of this discourse, to explain generally what is implied in having the heart enlarged. Like the man who is anxious to rectify the disorders, or retrieve the losses by which his temporal affairs have been deranged, they may set themselves with firm and determined purpose to rectify the disorders of their spiritual state; like him they may labour with diligence and assiduity to ward off the ruin that threatens to overwhelm them; and for a season too they may cherish the hope of not only

arresting the accumulation, but of diminishing the amount of the debt which already stands recorded against them. But they will soon find that their efforts are unavailing; that in spite of all these efforts, the guilt which they have contracted not only stands undiminished, but is daily gathering new accessions from the impurity and imperfections which cleave to the very best of their services; that their growing intimacy with the spirituality of the divine law is accompanied with a growing sense of their distance from conformity to its spirit; and that the course of new obedience on which they have entered, and which they hoped at the outset would conduct them to a state of comfort and repose, has only led them to a deeper and more humbling insight into the depravity of their nature, and the sinfulness of their life. They may, it is true, have undergone a reformation of character, to an extent which it would not be easy to estimate; and the time was perhaps, when, with incalculably less of any thing like holiness of heart and life, they would have thought themselves fully prepared to abide the solemnities of the judgment seat. But fair and goodly as the structure may appear, they are conscious that it is utterly inadequate to sustain the weight of their eternal concerns; and after all their endeavours to give it strength and solidity, they will still find that they dare not hazard upon it the interests of their soul.

While such then is their condition, there must necessarily cleave to them a depression of spirit which it will be impossible for them to throw off; the uncertainty which hangs over the momentous question, "Wherewith shall I come before the Lord?" will go far to cool the ardour of their holiest purposes, and wither the energy of their most vigorous efforts; a feeling of hopelessness will gradually steal over them, which, if not counteracted, would assuredly terminate either in utter despondency, or in their return to a state of insensibility and indifference; and did they give utterance to the longings of their straitened spirits, earnestly seeking deliverance from the oppression of suspicion and fear, it would be in the language of the text, "O that my heart were enlarged, that I might run the way of the divine commandments."

These are feelings which, with some modifications or varieties, arising from a diversity of constitution and external circumstances, will be readily recognised by many as accordant with their own experience; and with such persons there will be no difficulty in conceiving what the enlargement of heart was that the Psalmist longed for, and which he obviously represents as essential to cheerful and uniform obedience. It is deliverance from the bondage of fear under which the consciousness of unpardoned guilt has brought

the awakened sinner—the lightening of heart which he experiences, when he discovers that the obstacle which stood in the way of his return to God has been removed—the peace which he enjoys, when he is assured that without waiting till he has some personal righteousness of his own, on the strength of which he may venture to meet his Maker, he is invited at once to draw near to him as his Father, and his friend. And where is this deliverance, this spiritual emancipation to be found? The question is indeed a momentous one; but the answer is simple and satisfactory. It is to be found in the freely proclaimed salvation of the gospel—in the doctrine of reconciliation through the blood of the cross—in the warrant, nay the command, which is there given to every sinner to believe on the Son of God that he may have everlasting life—and in his receiving it as a faithful saying, and worthy of all acceptation, that Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners. In the knowledge and belief of this truth, the trembling penitent will find as complete a deliverance from his spiritual perplexities, as that man would experience in his worldly concerns, who by the interposition of a generous friend should be rescued from all his embarrassments, while ready to sink into despondency under the pressure of an overwhelming and daily accumulating debt; and the con-

sequences of such a deliverance will in both cases be the same—the revival of that vigorous exertion which was ready to be abandoned.

It has sometimes indeed been alleged, that the doctrines of free grace have a contrary tendency, and that instead of giving an impulse to new obedience, they are calculated to lull the sinner into indolence and sloth. But the assertion is as palpably at variance with the known principles of our constitution, as it is calumnious towards the gospel itself. It was the experience of the Psalmist, that when his heart was enlarged he ran the way of the divine commandments; and such also has been the experience of believers in every subsequent age. Nay, we do not hesitate to appeal to these, whether it is not true, that till they understood and believed the gospel proclamation of a free remission through the blood of Christ—till they saw that full permission was given them to repose on his finished mediatorial work—and till they began to taste the blessedness of being reconciled to God, they never knew what it was to perform one act of cheerful or willing obedience; that till they felt something of that change of relation towards their Maker, whereby the dread of a slave was displaced by the reverential and affectionate fear of a child, they were perpetually haunted by certain suspicions and misgivings which were utterly incompatible with filial obedience; and that every ef-

fort which they had till then made, in the way of compliance with the requirements of the divine law, was little else than a constrained act of external homage which they might have been afraid to withhold, but which it afforded them no pleasure or satisfaction to pay? All this, we are persuaded, they will readily admit; nor will they hesitate to acknowledge, that if they have in any measure known what it is to walk with God—if they have been conscious of any thing like a growing conformity to the divine image—and if they have ever felt it to be as their meat and drink to do the will of their Father in heaven, it has been exactly in proportion as they have experienced peace and joy in believing.

In proof and illustration of these remarks we might appeal to the nature of the gospel itself, and to the effects which it must necessarily produce wherever it is understood and believed. Its first and immediate object is to remove from the minds of sinners those unworthy suspicions of God, which constitute the strength of their enmity against him—to convince them that he loves and pities them—and to persuade them to lay aside their unreasonable hostility to his government, and their infatuated unwillingness to hold with him any spiritual intercourse; and wherever the Spirit of God gives it power and efficacy to accomplish this object, it will present the divine law to those who are so influenced by

it, in a light entirely new. Formerly they regarded that law as the authoritative mandate of a sovereign who was too powerful to be resisted, and too just to be offended with impunity; and, viewed in this light, it generated the spirit of bondage. From the moment their eyes were opened to the love of God manifested in Christ Jesus, that law appeared to them as the expression of the will, a transcript, so to speak, of the perfections of their heavenly Father—a Father whom they had learned to love and revere, and into whose image they longed to be transformed; and from that moment, therefore, conformity to his law was identified in their minds with the perfection of their nature, and the consummation of their blessedness. It thus appears that the belief of the gospel has a holy tendency, not merely by presenting the sinner with new and powerful motives to obedience, and laying upon him a stronger obligation to comply with the requirements of the divine law; but also and especially by exhibiting that law in a light entirely new to him: and in illustration of this remark, I might refer to any one of the precepts which have been there inculcated. As an example, let us consider the command given by our Lord to his disciples, whereby he enjoined them to love their enemies; and let us suppose that this commandment is inculcated on one who is still a stranger to the constraining power of the love of Christ. Such a

man might be told that it is the authoritative injunction of the sovereign of heaven and earth —that he is required to comply with it on the pain of God's righteous displeasure—and that, if he fails to do so, the forfeiture of eternal life will assuredly be the consequence. But we will venture to say, that even if he believed all this, and knew that his everlasting well-being depended on his obedience, it would not awaken in his mind one feeling of affection or regard towards one who was before the object of his displeasure and dislike. Let us suppose, however, that the same individual were awakened to a sense of his own obstinate and unreasonable hostility to God; that he were brought to see the malignity of that ingratitude, which none but a divine compassion could have so long and so patiently endured; that he were melted into godly sorrow and contrition by the contemplation of the Saviour's love; and that he turned from this contemplation to review the injuries that he had himself received at the hand of a fellow sinner: and what would be the effect of this change of character on the feelings which he formerly cherished towards his offending brother? Would he not feel humbled and ashamed that he should have for an instant entertained one angry or vindictive feeling? would not his dislike give way to a sentiment of pity—pity that would approach indefinitely near to a feeling of affectionate concern for

his welfare? and the more vividly he should retain the impression of the Redeemer's love to himself, would he not the more easily exercise that love towards another? It is thus that the divine law, which to the natural man is a painful and most unreasonable restraint, becomes to the renewed man a law of love; and the more that he experiences enlargement of heart, the more cheerfully will he "run the way of the divine commandments."

SERMON XIII.

THE EFFECTS OF FAITH EXEMPLIFIED IN THE CHARACTER OF GIDEON.

JUDGES viii. 4.

Faint, yet pursuing.

THE narrative of which our text forms a part, refers to events in the history of the Israelites, that took place about two hundred years after the memorable period of their passing over Jordan, to take possession of the land promised to their fathers. It will be recollected that on the death of Moses, Joshua was selected and set apart by divine appointment to be his successor; that under his conduct and direction, the land of Canaan was vanquished and taken possession of by the armies of Israel; and that he had so far executed the work with which he had been intrusted, as to assign to each tribe by lot its portion in the promised inheritance. The his-

tory of the victories which he won, and the arrangements which he made respecting the possessions of his brethren, will be found detailed at length in the book that bears his name; and if we would see an interesting summary of what was actually accomplished through the instrumentality of his wisdom and fortitude, we have only to refer to the appeal which he made to his countrymen a short time before his death. Feeling, in the growing infirmities of age, an intimation of his approaching dissolution, and anxious to avail himself of every circumstance that might give solemnity to his admonitions, he called together the elders of the people—those who had been witnesses of the unwearied assiduity, with which he had devoted all the vigour and energy of a long and active life to the service of his brethren—and mingling salutary counsel with his dying benediction, he thus addressed the assembled heads of the tribes of Israel, "Behold this day I am going the way of all the earth, and ye know in all your hearts and in all your souls, that not one thing hath failed of all the good things which the Lord your God spake concerning you; all are come to pass unto you, and not one thing hath failed thereof."

But though, at the period to which I now refer, the land of Canaan might be considered as actually in the power and possession of the Israelites; though the Lord had given rest unto Is-

rael from all their enemies round about; and though to all appearance, any attempt on the part of the latter to expel the former, or recover the possessions from which they had, by divine authority, been removed, was altogether hopeless; yet there were still, in various parts of the interior, as well as in the borders of Canaan, multitudes of the original inhabitants, who had not been driven out at the time of Joshua's decease. The subjugation of Canaan was, for the wisest purposes, to be gradually effected through the exertions of the Israelites themselves; and however successful, therefore, these exertions might be, a certain time was necessary for the full accomplishment of the undertaking. That the work of conquest, however, was not intended to be relinquished, until the remnant of the original inhabitants was completely expelled, is abundantly obvious from the whole spirit and tenor of the communications that were made to the Israelites on the subject: nay, they were distinctly warned, that if they did not follow up the victories with which a divine power had crowned their past exertions, and execute to the uttermost the divine judgment on the idolatry of Canaan, the very people whom they spared, and over whom they might suppose that they had acquired a permanent supremacy, would not only prove a snare to them, and draw them away from the worship of the living God, but would be employed, in their

turn, to execute against the Israelites themselves the purposes of his holy displeasure. Among the last communications that were made to the children of Israel by Moses, we find recorded this impressive admonition, " when ye are passed over Jordan, into the land of Canaan ; then ye shall drive out all the inhabitants of the land from before you, and destroy all their pictures, and destroy all their molten images, and quite pluck down all their high places; and ye shall dispossess the inhabitants of the land, and dwell therein ; for I have given you the land to possess it. But if ye will not drive out the inhabitants of the land from before you ; then it shall come to pass, that those which ye let remain of them shall be pricks in your eyes, and thorns in your sides, and shall vex you in the land wherein ye dwell. Moreover it shall come to pass, that I shall do unto you as I thought to do unto them." Similar to this was the admonition delivered by Joshua on the occasion to which I have already referred, when he addressed the elders and judges of Israel for the last time. " Behold, I have divided unto you by lot, those nations that remain. And the Lord your God, he shall expel them from before you, and drive them from out of your sight ; and ye shall possess their land, as the Lord your God hath promised unto you. But if ye do in any wise go back, and cleave unto the remnant of these nations, and shall make marriages with

them; know for a certainty that the Lord your God will no more drive out any of these nations from before you; but they shall be snares and traps unto you, and scourges in your sides, and thorns in your eyes, until ye perish from off this good land which the Lord your God hath given you."

Such was the condition of the Israelites at the death of Joshua. Their conquests had already been so extensive, and their authority so firmly consolidated, that they had nothing to fear from any attempt on the part of their enemies; the remnant that still dwelt among them, though sufficient to put their obedience to the test, could neither disturb their peace nor endanger their security; and had they gone forward in the strength of divine aid, and relying on the faithfulness of the divine promise, the destiny of every nation of Canaan was at their disposal. In direct disobedience, however, to the commission which they had received, they stopt short in their work of conquest; and from this period may be dated the commencement of that series of calamities in which they were successively involved. Animated, as it would appear, by the dying admonition of Joshua, we find them at the beginning of this book asking counsel of God, and under the divine direction prosecuting with vigour and success what remained to be accomplished of the final subjugation of Canaan. But in the very

same chapter we find it recorded of at least one half of the tribes of Israel, that they permitted the inhabitants of many cities to remain, satisfied with retaining as tributaries those whom they had been commanded, and but for their own faithlessness would have been enabled completely to expel; and scarcely had the generation which had witnessed the triumphs of Joshua passed away, when we find fully verified all that had been foretold of the backsliding and apostacy of Israel. "They forsook the Lord God of their fathers, which brought them out of the land of Egypt, and followed other gods, of the gods of the people that were round about them, and bowed themselves unto them, and provoked the Lord to anger." The consequence of this defection accorded also with what had been predicted. They soon found, in their bitter experience, that God never wanted ministers to fulfil all his pleasure in the way of judgment as well as mercy; that the very spot where they flattered themselves that they had established their authority on a foundation that was never to be moved, might prove the scene of defeat and overthrow; and that those whom they had brought into a state of seemingly permanent subjection, might yet be armed with a power that would prove ruinous to their peace, and ultimately fatal to their liberty. "The anger of the Lord was hot against Israel, and he delivered them into the hands of spoilers

that spoiled them, and he sold them into the hands of their enemies round about, so that they could not any longer stand before their enemies. Whithersoever they went out, the hand of the Lord was against them for evil, as the Lord had said, and as the Lord had sworn unto them : and they were greatly distressed."

But while the disobedience of the Israelites was thus visited with repeated manifestations of the divine displeasure, they were not utterly cast off. The object of all these chastisements was to recover them from their apostacy ; and as often as they cried unto God in their distress, he gave them such a respite, or wrought for them such a deliverance, as was sufficient to show that the oppression which they felt, and the dangers which they dreaded, were chargeable only on their own delinquencies. " Nevertheless," says the sacred historian, " the Lord raised up judges which delivered them out of the hand of those that spoiled them. And when the Lord raised them up judges, then the Lord was with the judge, and delivered them out of the hand of their enemies all the days of the judge: for it repented the Lord because of their groanings, by reason of them that oppressed them and vexed them." Yet no sooner had they begun to experience tranquillity and repose, than they again forgot to whom they had been indebted for their deliverance ; and with an infatuation, for which it may

appear difficult to account, courted new alliances with those nations of whom experience should have taught them, that their friendship was more to be dreaded than their enmity, and towards whom their safety required them to maintain the attitude of open and undisguised hostility; for "it came to pass, when the judge was dead, that they returned and corrupted themselves more than their fathers, in following other gods to serve them, and to bow down unto them; they ceased not from their own doings, nor from their stubborn way."

It was after a series of events manifesting the forbearance and mercy of God on the one hand, and the ingratitude and obstinacy of the Israelites on the other, that in consequence of a new revolt they were delivered into the hand of Midian, who prevailed against them, and "because of whom the children of Israel made them the dens which are in the mountains, and caves, and strongholds; relinquishing to their enemies, who are said to have been as grasshoppers for multitude, the fruits of their labour and the richest of their land; while they themselves appeared rather as the remnant of a vanquished nation, than the inhabitants of a free and independent country. For seven years were they exposed to the overwhelming invasions of their powerful adversaries, and subjected to all the misery and degradation of a state of vassalage; when, in answer to their

supplications, God was pleased to raise up for them a deliverer in the person of Gideon, the individual referred to in the words of our text. To this man, the sacred historian informs us, an angel of the Lord appeared, while he was employed, secretly for fear of the Midianites, in providing for the sustenance of his father's house, and addressed him with the unexpected salutation, "the Lord is with thee, thou mighty man of valour." The answer which Gideon returned to this address is at once expressive of the despondency which he himself felt, and most strikingly descriptive of the hopeless condition to which his countrymen had been reduced. "Oh my Lord, if the Lord be with us, why then is all this befallen us? and where be all his miracles which our fathers told us of, saying, did not the Lord bring us up from Egypt? but now the Lord hath forsaken us, and delivered us into the hands of the Midianites. And the Lord looked upon him, and said, Go in this thy might, and thou shalt save Israel from the hand of the Midianites: have not I sent thee? And he said unto him, Oh my Lord, wherewith shall I save Israel? behold, my family is poor in Manasseh, and I am the least in my father's house." To all these doubts and difficulties a simple and decisive reply was given in the express assurance of the divine protection and aid; and God having condescended to grant him a sign which

could leave him no room to doubt the divine authority of the communication which he had received, we find Gideon yielding prompt obedience to the command which he received that very night, to break down the altar of Baal which his father had, and to cut down the grove that was by it. In consequence of this commencement of open hostility against the idolatry of his countrymen, he exposed himself to the enmity of the votaries of Baal. But, trusting in the protection of the God of Israel, by whose authority he acted, he fearlessly met their opposition, and under the influence of a divine impulse proclaimed war with the enemies of God and of his country. "The Spirit of the Lord came upon him, and he blew a trumpet, and Abi-ezer was gathered after him."

But though his countrymen, by the promptitude and alacrity with which they obeyed his summons, testified their readiness to engage in any enterprise against their enemies, he was not without some apprehensions regarding the success of his undertaking; and it was not till he had received new tokens, and tokens also of his own choosing, that he felt assured of a decisive victory over the formidable armies of Midian. It might have been supposed indeed, that finding himself at the head of thirty thousand men, seemingly prepared to encounter any danger, and animated by the consideration that their all was

at stake, he might have felt something like confidence as to the result of the approaching conflict, even with all the fearful odds that were against him. His confidence, however, was placed where it ought to have been, in the aid and support of the Lord of hosts. Without this he was convinced that no wisdom in counsel, nor any exertions in the field could ever effect the deliverance of Israel; while, with the assurance that God was with him, he was ready to enter on the undertaking with a hundredth part of the forces which had enlisted under his banner; and, in point of fact, he was destined to achieve the redemption of his country with less than the hundredth part of the army with which he set out. "The Lord said unto Gideon, the people that are with thee are too many for me to give the Midianites into their hands; lest Israel vaunt themselves against me, saying, mine own hand hath saved me."

That the hand of God, therefore, might be more visibly displayed in their deliverance, Gideon was commanded to proclaim through the camp of Israel, that such as had any fears of their personal safety, or any misgivings about the success of the enterprise, were at liberty to depart and return to their homes; and scarcely had this proclamation been made when he beheld twenty and two thousand take their departure. In consequence of this desertion—for in as far as

the motives of those who departed were concerned, it could be regarded in no other light—he was left with ten thousand men; and even of this small and apparently inadequate force he was told that they were yet too many, and that a farther reduction of their numbers was still to take place before they entered upon the conflict. Another experiment was accordingly made, and the result was, that Gideon found himself opposed to the countless multitudes of the Midian host with three hundred followers—brave indeed, and right-hearted men—but men of whom worldly policy would have pronounced it the most desperate infatuation, to have encountered the overwhelming force of a great and hitherto victorious army. It was just here, however, that the character of Gideon assumed the most interesting aspect in which it is exhibited to us. So long as there lurked in his mind one lingering sentiment of distrust in the divine promise, his courage failed him, even while he surveyed the support which he was entitled to look for, from thirty thousand of the bravest and most devoted of the fighting men of Israel. But the suspicions of an unbelieving heart being dissipated, he contemplated, without apprehension or dismay, the successive desertion of his troops; his faith had by that time been transferred from the bravery of his fellow soldiers, to the protection and aid of the Lord of hosts; and he manifested, at the head of

his little band, a fortitude and firmness, which the assembled forces of a third of the tribes of Israel had failed to inspire. Nor were his hopes disappointed. The appalling signal, " the sword of the Lord and of Gideon," spread consternation and dismay through the camp of Midian ; a spirit of phrenzy and despair seized those who were, a moment before, reposing in the security of their strength and numbers ; the Lord set every man's sword against his fellow, even throughout all the host ; and " there fell of them an hundred and twenty thousand men that drew the sword." Nor did Gideon stop short here, as if the signal overthrow which his enemies had experienced were all that was necessary to effect the deliverance of Israel. It was by neglecting, or refusing to follow up former victories, that they had been involved in all the calamities under which they had so long laboured ; and so far, therefore, from sitting down to enjoy the fruits of his triumph, that triumph was only the commencement of his most laborious and persevering exertions. The remnant of the Midianites had indeed been put to flight, and its strength amounted only to fifteen thousand men ; but till these too were defeated, the commission which he had received was not executed ; and it is in the ardent pursuit of these, amidst all the fatigue and exhaustion of a difficult and protracted march, that he is introduced to our notice in the words of the text,—" he

came to Jordan, and passed over, he and the three hundred men that were with him, faint, yet pursuing."

The historical abstract which we have now submitted will be useful, we trust, for the elucidation of the practical inferences which the text seems to inculcate. To those whose perusal of that history may not have been very recent, nor their recollections very distinct, the detail now given will perhaps place the text in a more striking point of view than it would otherwise have appeared; while they who are familiar with the facts just stated, can hardly fail to have already made that application of them, to which we would now, for a little, more particularly advert. The application itself consists in contemplating the expedition on which Gideon was sent against the enemies of his country, as a representation of the warfare in which every Christian is engaged; and the practical lesson which it inculcates, is to bear in mind that the active and vigorous perseverance of the former is the only attitude which it is either safe or becoming in the latter to maintain. That the Christian life is indeed a warfare will be admitted by all who are in the slightest degree acquainted with the Scriptures, and felt by every one who has practically learned what is to be understood by spiritual adversaries; nor will any one dispute the reality of the parallel that may be drawn between the conquest of Canaan and the final

triumph of the believer. As the former, though secured to the family of Abraham by a promise which could neither be broken nor defeated, was nevertheless the fruit of many a victory, and at every step of its progress intimately connected with the exertions of the Israelites themselves; so the latter, though depending on the faithfulness of a similar promise, necessarily involves in it a conflict, from which the believer can neither with consistency nor safety for one moment desist.

But while all this will be acknowledged as true, it is a truth which we fear is often but very indistinctly conceived of. To some the expression Christian warfare may convey but a very vague and indistinct conception; the language may be familiar to those who have never practically felt the reality of the thing itself; and many may be ready, on hearing that language, to congratulate themselves on their triumphs, though they have neither encountered the enemies that yet remain to be vanquished, nor even assayed the armour by which the victory is to be won. Measuring their obedience to the divine law by the ordinary standard of human virtue, and estimating their character by the average of this world's morality, they may have had no difficulty in laying their desires under such restraints, and moulding their conduct into such an external form, as has secured for them a competent share of the approbation

and esteem of their fellow-men; with this they may be resting satisfied, without once suspecting that any thing more is implied in being what the apostle denominates spiritually-minded; and their ordinary practice having settled down into habits of sobriety, decorum, and outward respectability, it may require but little effort on their part to retain the character which they have acquired, and stand at the same level of virtuous attainment to which they have once risen. In the estimation of such persons, therefore, the Christian warfare becomes a very short and a very easy conflict; and though they may form some idea of the difficulties that must be surmounted, the passions that must be subdued, and the inveterate habits that must be overcome, before the openly profane can reach the point at which they themselves have arrived; yet, in their own case, the struggle may have been neither a severe nor a long protracted one, and they may be flattering themselves, that if they only exercise a moderate degree of vigilance and circumspection, not to lose what they have already gained, the field is won and the victory secure. But, alas! with such persons the conflict is yet to begin; they have never once surveyed the field of battle, nor seen the adversaries that are arrayed against them; and if they are wrapping themselves up in a feeling of security and peace, it is not because they have fought and conquered, but

because they have never come in sight of the enemy's camp. Did they but know the ground which they occupy, and the terms on which they stand with relation to God—had they ever made one effort to ascertain the depth and deceitfulness of their own heart—could they but measure the distance to which the world has drawn them away from a state of conformity to the will and image of their maker—and had they ever experienced any thing of the painful struggle that must be gone through, before a soul whose every faculty has been matured, and every desire has gathered strength, in a state of alienation from God, can be turned wholly to him as all its portion and its exceeding great reward; instead of resting satisfied with an easy conquest over this or the other propensity of their nature, they would be ready to regard the longest life of active and persevering exertion as altogether inadequate to so mighty an achievement, as that of bringing their estranged and stubborn affections into an humble and holy acquiescence in the divine will. Yet such is the achievement which every Christian must contemplate; and the man who would be contented with any attainment short of this, must be regarded as having begun to build without counting the cost—as having rashly proclaimed war without inquiring whether he is able, with ten thousand, to meet him that cometh against him with twenty thousand.

For the truth of these remarks, we might refer to the general scope and tenor of the Scriptures, or appeal to the experience of all who have ever made one honest and determined effort to turn the affections of a long alienated heart to God, and subordinate every desire of a perverted will to the spirit and the dictates of the divine law. It becomes therefore one of the most momentous questions which a young inquirer can set about solving, on what grounds he is fairly to embark on so formidable a warfare, and from what quarter he is to draw encouragement and strength for persevering in the contest. Now, to this question, our text, taken in connexion with the circumstances of the history of which it forms a part, furnishes a simple and most satisfactory answer. It not only directs us to the principle in which the active exertions and the devoted obedience of the believer originate; but it exemplifies by the exhibition of a special case, the practical operation of that principle, as presenting motives of constantly accumulating power in urging them to perseverance, in bringing to them an accession of strength at every stage of their progress, and giving to them a new impulse with every new object of resistance which they may be called to encounter. I allude to the faith by which the believer enters into a state of reconciliation with God; when the divine character is divested to his eye of all the terrors with which

a guilty conscience had arrayed it; when he surrenders himself to the subduing influence of the love of Christ; and when he is enabled to devolve on the great Captain of his salvation, as all his righteousness and all his strength, the whole burden of his spiritual concerns. It is this principle alone that will ever arm him with a determined resolution of uniform and persevering resistance to sin; and the manner in which it will operate is most intelligibly exemplified in the case before us.

We could easily conceive, that long before Gideon received any direct communication from heaven, he had tasted the bitterness of oppression and was alive to the miseries of his countrymen; that he would willingly have made an effort to rescue himself and his country from that foreign domination which was becoming every day more intolerable, and threatened to prove the utter extinction of their rights and liberties; that the pressure of present suffering, and the anticipation of future and still more grievous calamities, had at times kindled within him a spirit of resistance to the cruelties and exactions of the enemy; and that, if the united voice of his countrymen had called him to head a general insurrection against their invaders, he might have felt willing, and appeared forward to obey the summons. Enough, however, has been recorded to satisfy us, that such an enterprise must, from the very

outset, have been clogged with a depressing weight which no human power could have removed, and soon relinquished as altogether a hopeless undertaking. Gideon was impressed with the conviction that God had abandoned Israel. While this impression continued, it would have gone to extinguish any hope which the union or the bravery of his brethren might have for a moment awakened, and to paralyze every energy which he might have been disposed to put forth; and, in fact, it was only when this impression was removed, and succeeded by the assurance that God was again to visit and redeem his people, that the character of Gideon assumed that fortitude, and firmness, and unextinguishable ardour, which are so strikingly manifested in the text.

Such, then, in reality, is the experience of every believer. The sinner may, in various ways, be made partially alive, at least to the mischief of sin, if not to its malignity, just as Gideon was to the oppression of the Midianites. He may trace to it some of the temporal calamities which have overtaken him, with regard to his personal comfort, his interest, or his respectability; the voice of conscience, if it has been at all illuminated by the elementary truths of revelation, may sometimes make itself be heard in spite of every effort to put it down; and the anticipation of a coming judgment and future retribution, may assume an aspect so dark and lowering as to appal even the

most daring of the children of disobedience. Under impressions like these, therefore, he may resolve on abandoning a course where ruin is palpably inevitable, and betaking himself to safer ground than he has hitherto occupied; he may commence a warfare with the unholy propensities which he once gratified, and resist many of the temptations by which he was formerly led a willing captive; and he may manifest a firm and determined purpose of fighting his way into a place of security and safety. But is there any difficulty in foreseeing what must be the fate of such a resolution as this? It is just such a resolution as we might suppose Gideon occasionally formed while he was still labouring under the depressing idea that God had forsaken his people, and turned his hand against his heritage; for till the sinner is brought to accept the terms on which God proposes to treat with him on the subject of justification—till he sees the Almighty as a reconciled father in Christ, and feels the influence of a father's compassion bringing back his alienated affections—till he perceives how the controversy which he has so long maintained with his Maker can be set at rest—and till he is willing to enter into a state of amity and peace with God through the blood of atonement; his warfare with sin, whatever form it may assume, or to whatever extent it may be carried, is in reality an unwilling warfare, and will cease at every point, where the

fear of punishment is not brought into immediate and powerful operation. In point of fact, it cannot be called a warfare with sin at all, inasmuch as the resistance which he offers to it originates merely in the dread of its consequences. If he fancies that he hates sin, he utterly misconceives the object of his dislike; for did he but examine the state of his heart and feelings, he would find that its enmity is directed to a very different object; that his conflict is with the holiness of the divine nature, and not with the sinfulness of his own; and that, if he could contrive to forget or overlook the former, his opposition to the latter would quickly be at an end. It is thus that multitudes who have set out in a very fair and hopeful way, have soon been seen to relax their efforts, and to relinquish their purposes; and by sinking gradually down into a state of settled apathy and indifference, have furnished so many practical proofs, that no man will ever hate sin till he has himself ceased to be an enemy of God; that so long as he is ignorant of the way of reconciliation, or unwilling to acquiesce in it, there will be a feeling of hopelessness about every effort that he makes against a corrupted nature, or a sinful world; that there will be neither cheerfulness in maintaining the conflict, nor confidence as to its result, till he has ground to hope that God is on his side; and that it is only by faith in Christ that there is placed at the believer's disposal the heavenly ar-

mour in which he can go forth, with a feeling of security, to meet his spiritual adversaries.

We have thus seen that the great motive by which the believer is at first excited to enter on an active and vigorous resistance to every thing sinful, is essentially the same with the principle by which Gideon was excited to undertake the enterprise against the enemies of his country ; and we might now proceed to show, what indeed it is the more immediate object of the text to illustrate, how the same motive continues to give new life and vigour to the Christian at every stage of his progress. At present, however, we would advert for a little to a reflection suggested by the considerations already submitted.

It may be that there are some amongst us who have never yet fairly met, or set about solving the question, whether they have been reconciled unto God ; and who cannot be made to see that such a solution is at all essential to their persevering in the Christian warfare, in the sense in which they understand that expression. Satisfied with a decent profession, and an irreproachable morality, they may never have felt that any such motive or encouragement, as we have now been considering, is at all required to excite them to the practice of what is praiseworthy, as far as they either desire or deem necessary. They may never, in fact, have seen that the point of their acceptance with God is the most

momentous of all the questions that can occupy them; or, if they do at times for a moment entertain it, they may regard it as one to be hereafter determined, and look forward to it as the result of a virtuous life—as a reward to which they can have no claim or pretension, until they have fulfilled what they believe to be the conditions on which it is promised. They may even suppose that they are thus making the hope of pardon a motive to obedience, in the only conceivable way in which it can prove so; and contenting themselves with such a measure of obedience as they find it convenient to yield, or conceive it reasonable to be expected, they may put off the inquiry into the relation in which they stand to God, with some indefinite and indistinct purpose of taking it up at some future period, perhaps at the very close of life, when they shall have accumulated so many righteousnesses and virtuous doings, as may entitle them to look, with some degree of confidence, for an acquittal at the judgment seat of God. But does not such an opinion actually remove the pardon of sin from the righteousness of Christ, where the Scriptures have placed it, to the merits and obedience of the sinner himself? Is it not virtually to declare, that they are expecting to be justified by the deeds of the law? And does not the very motive which they allege is hereby furnished them to the practice of virtue imply, that in their obedience, with all its imperfections, there is still

enough to invest them with the character of righteous in the sight of God?

It is not, however, to the fatal misconception of the way of salvation implied in this view of the subject, that I would at present particularly advert. It indicates something wrong in the state of the heart as well as of the understanding; and will be found, on examination, to be an unequivocal symptom of unsubdued antipathy to spiritual things. The sinner who has never entered seriously on the inquiry how matters stand between God and his soul, or who has abandoned the inquiry, without coming to any thing like a satisfactory decision, virtually declares that he is unwilling to come so closely into contact with the divine character, as such an inquiry would unavoidably bring him; and whatever subterfuges he may have recourse to, in order to justify his putting off the question, it is still but the contrivance of a deceitful heart to place God at a convenient distance—such a distance as may not powerfully awaken his aversion to holiness, or excite the uneasiness with which that aversion, when called forth, never fails to be accompanied. And what kind of resistance to sin can ever be expected from one in such a condition as this? With some of its more aggravated forms he may maintain a feeble, or even, to a certain extent, a successful warfare. But so long as his heart is opposed to God it must be in league with sin, nor

will he ever know what it is to resist it, till his reconciliation to his Maker becomes a question too momentous to be any longer delayed, till he is brought in sober seriousness to say, "What shall I do to be saved?" and until he discovers with clearness and certainty how that question is to be determined.

SERMON XIV.

THE EFFECTS OF FAITH EXEMPLIFIED IN THE CHARACTER OF GIDEON.

JUDGES viii. 4.

Faint, yet pursuing.

WERE we to set out in the practical application of these words, with the simple proposition, that the character of Gideon, as it is presented to us in the text, may be considered as an example for the imitation of Christians; and did we take occasion from this example to inculcate generally a patient continuance in well-doing, we could contemplate a great deal of misconception following upon such a statement. It is a melancholy, but, we fear, an undoubted fact, that among those who wear the externals of a Christian profession, and avowedly recognise the obligations they are under to order their walk and conversation so as to accord with that profession, the term Christian

is understood in a great latitude of signification; that, in the estimation of many, to believe the gospel implies little more than an uninteresting admission of its truth, without any distinct perception either of its meaning or its importance; and that to obey the gospel requires nothing beyond a decorous observance of its ordinances, and a decent compliance with the letter of its more prominent precepts. There is thus given to the word Christian a vagueness of meaning, by which it may be found united with an almost endless variety of character, and may be made, within certain limits at least, to denote any thing which the individual employing the term may be pleased to understand by it; and while, in its strict and true interpretation, it is applicable only to the man who, placing implicit credit in the record which God has given concerning his Son, acquiesces with all his heart in the proposals of that record as made to himself individually, and is unreservedly surrendering himself to a life of faith on the Son of God; the title is claimed with unhesitating confidence, even by many who are scarcely, if at all, above the lowest point to which, in the loose estimate of this world's morality, a man may sink down before he forfeits his Christian character. Were we to address ourselves, then, to professing Christians generally, in the language of admonition, and urge them, by such an example as that before us, to

steadfastness and perseverance, it is quite possible, that among those in whose hearing these admonitions should be delivered, there might be many who would understand by such an exhortation something very different from the true meaning and import of the text. However inaccurate or undefined their notions of the gospel might be, it would, in all probability, never once occur to them to inquire, whether they had yet set their faces Zionward; but, assuming that they were Christians, they would regard all that we might urge upon them, as an exhortation to hold on in the way which they have hitherto been pursuing, however wide it might be of the path that leads to everlasting life.

It might be supposed, indeed, that the eagerness and the ardour exemplified in the text, when contrasted with the apathy and indolence which will ever be found to characterize the nominal Christian, might awaken some suspicion respecting their pretensions to the Christian character; and that the consciousness of there never having been on their part any thing at all of the anxiety about their spiritual safety, which Gideon manifested about consummating his victory over the Midianites, might suggest, and even irresistibly force upon them, the inquiry, whether with them the business of the Christian life is not yet to begin. But obvious and unavoidable as this inquiry might at first sight appear to be, there is

no difficulty in perceiving, how they who have misunderstood the gospel scheme, in as far as its simple truths are concerned, may contrive to evade a question which refers to the state of their feelings and affections; and how they, whose natural aversion to spiritual things has rather been laid asleep than extinguished, should satisfy themselves with a very slight degree of interest in the subject, as all that can either be required or expected. Though any resistance to sin which they may have put forth, or any virtuous aspirations which they may have felt, have been too feeble and transitory to deserve the name of a conflict, and cannot admit of being at all placed by the side of the determined and persevering exertions exemplified in the text; yet, in their own estimation, they may have been making all the sacrifices, and exercising all the vigilance which their safety requires, or their circumstances render necessary. However low may be their estimate of the Christian profession, yet, if they feel any thing at all of the obligations which it imposes, or any desire to keep within those limits which the general sentiment of the community in which they live has prescribed, as the utmost extent to which a Christian can go in conformity to the world, without relinquishing his title to that character, they will sometimes be required to exercise self-denial, to struggle with unholy inclinations from within, and resist sinful solici-

tations from without: for that man must stand low indeed in the scale by which moral character is estimated, who is never exposed to the temptation of sinking lower. They may fancy, therefore, that the efforts which they make, to maintain the ground that they have hitherto occupied, are painful and laborious enough to entitle them to a place among those who are engaged in the Christian warfare; and though they may be constrained to acknowledge, that they have never felt any thing like the ardour and devotedness which the text exemplifies, yet the confession has never perhaps excited one serious doubt, whether they have really entered on the conflict that is to terminate in the believer's final exaltation to glory. In the representation of what a Christian's warfare should be, as suggested by the example before us, they may professedly acquiesce, or even express some sort of vague and indefinite wish, that they were all that this representation implies. But did they speak out what they feel, they would perhaps allege, that, after all, it is one of those exaggerated delineations of character and Christian attainment which no man in sober seriousness aims at in his own person, or expects to see realized in others; and thus it might happen, that while we were urging on professing Christians an imitation of the pattern here set before us, and while our statement seemed to be placidly acquiesced in, it might be left to evaporate in mere

speculation, as something that is neither necessary nor practicable; and we might all the while be ministering to the delusion of multitudes, who are satisfied with a name to live, while, in reality, they are spiritually dead.

It was with a view to remove or prevent such a misconception as this, that we endeavoured, on a former occasion, to trace the obedience of the Christian to the principle in which it must originate, and by the operation of which alone it can ever become uniform and permanent; and availed ourselves of the simple and intelligible illustration of the subject, furnished by the history from which our text is taken. In the case before us, indeed, the reality and the influence of the principle to which we refer, are too obvious and palpable to be either disputed or misunderstood. When the four tribes of Israel first assembled at the summons of Gideon, and prepared, under his direction, to take the field against Midian, there appeared no reason to doubt, that they were all actuated by the same spirit, nor any grounds to suppose that there was a secret backwardness among them to meet any danger, or encounter any difficulty, to which the meditated expedition might expose them; and when Gideon received a commandment to proclaim through the camp, that the fearful and the faint-hearted were at liberty to depart to their homes, there was nothing, so far as we can judge, up to the moment

when the proclamation was issued, by which he could have distinguished who were, and who were not, right-hearted men. Yet, under the shelter of the permission which this proclamation granted, more than two-thirds of Gideon's army retired from the field; thus unequivocally acknowledging, that under all the imposing appearance of ardour and enthusiasm which they had assumed, there was still lurking a spirit of distrust and of unbelief. By assembling at the call of Gideon, they professedly recognised the divine authority of the communication which he had received, and publicly expressed their confidence in the victory that had been promised. But, in availing themselves of the first apology that offered for withdrawing from the enterprise, the secret, which they were afraid at first perhaps to acknowledge to themselves, was elicited; and it was found that, however willing they might have been to reap the benefit of a victory over their enemies, they were not prepared to undergo the toils and the perils of the conflict.

And what was it, then, that constituted the difference between the many thousands that deserted Gideon, and the few hundreds that remained devoted to his cause? The answer to this question is abundantly obvious. The latter were persuaded, as Gideon himself was, that God was with them; the former still doubted whether his hand might not be turned against them

in the hour of battle; the one class believed on the simple declaration of the Almighty that his controversy with them had ceased—the other received that declaration with a lurking suspicion, that the rebellion with which their conscience charged them could not be so fully and freely forgiven, as that they could reckon on God standing their friend in the season of danger; and while the believing few, therefore, surrendered themselves with unhesitating and unreserved confidence, to the disposal of their gracious and reconciled sovereign, the unbelieving many withdrew in sullen and distrustful disobedience—questioning the veracity of the living God—the God whom they were conscious of having offended, and towards whom their hearts were not yet reconciled. Nor can we be at any loss to perceive how widely different the exertions of the two classes must have been, on the supposition that the warfare had been a severe and a protracted one, and that they had both continued for a time to co-operate in the undertaking. The confidence which the one party placed in the protection of the Almighty, and in the faithfulness of his promise, must have impressed on all their efforts a character that could not be misunderstood; there would have been such a life, and energy, and vigour about them, as must have unequivocally shown that victory was their object, and that victory alone would satisfy them; and while accu-

mulating difficulties urged upon them the necessity of increased exertion, so far from being discouraged, or depressed into a state of hopelessness and inactivity, they would have felt assured that in the very act of putting forth the strength which they had, new strength would be imparted, adequate to meet and to surmount every new obstacle that might be presented. But how different must have been the aspect which the contest would have assumed in the eye of the doubtful and the unbelieving! In consequence of their unbelief, they must have carried with them into the field the painful and depressing idea, that he who could alone give them victory might still be found standing on the side of their enemies; such an idea must have invested the whole enterprise with dangers and difficulties, against which no courage of their own could support them; their efforts, if they made any at all, must have been the efforts, not of hope or confidence, but of blind and reckless desperation, which served only to exhaust and to dispirit them; each successive difficulty must have annihilated, as it were, a portion of their little strength; every new exertion would be more faithless and feeble than the former; and sooner or later, they must have relinquished a warfare, for which they felt themselves utterly unprovided with adequate resources.

There can be no doubt, we think, that such

must have been the difference between the exertions of the two portions of Gideon's army—had they been both brought into the field—so long as the one was actuated by an unshaken confidence in the divine promise, and the other was under the influence of unbelief; and we have already endeavoured to show, that something not very unlike this will be found to exist among those, who appear to be engaged in the spiritual warfare, to which the gospel summons every man who hears it. Among any given number, indeed, of professing Christians, such a difference may not be very easily detected; like the first assembling of the Israelitish army, all may appear equally ardent and equally determined; and so long as a fair and consistent profession is maintained, we might be, and in charity ought to be, disposed to infer that all are equally sincere. But were it competent for us to develop the motives by which they are actuated—could we elicit fully the hopes and the fears from which their exertions derive their chief impulse—or had we circumstances so much under our control, as to make on the whole multitude the same direct and decisive experiment that was made on the army of Gideon; it would be found, that they who have never fairly met, nor seriously entertained, the question of their acceptance with God, however vigorous they may appear to be in their opposition to what is sinful, and in the pursuit of what

is virtuous, are labouring under the same heartlessness and depression, which the unbelieving Israelites would have felt, in maintaining a protracted conflict with the host of Midian; that if they cannot contrive to set their minds at ease, by persuading themselves that they have already gained all the victories over sin which it is necessary for them to aspire after, it is with feelings of fear and reluctance that they look forward to what remains of the contest; and that, after their most laborious, and what they may be disposed for a moment to think their most successful strivings against the corruption of their nature, and the sinful practices of the world, the question will be perpetually recurring, Have I now, by this sacrifice or act of self-denial, secured the favour and friendship of God?

Nor does this hold true with those merely who are vainly endeavouring by their own righteousness to avert the holy displeasure of an offended Judge, or, as it is in such cases sometimes expressed, to make their peace with their Maker. The unhappy effects of an indistinct or mistaken idea of the way of reconciliation, may be seen in many who have honestly relinquished, as they believe, every such ground of hope, and, under the conviction that Christ is the only mediator between God and sinners, manifest an earnest desire to be interested in the blessings of his salvation. Such persons will often be heard to em-

ploy the language of deep and heartfelt contrition on the review of their past disobedience; they will speak of their unworthiness in terms which leave no doubt of their being convinced, that it is by free grace alone they can ever be saved; and, to judge from their whole manner, we should infer, that their spiritual concerns have assumed too momentous an appearance in their eye to leave them at peace or rest, till they have arrived at a clearer assurance than they yet have of their ultimate safety. And yet, with all this, they may in reality be acting on a self-righteous principle; they may be wasting their strength, as it were, in unavailing complaints about what they are, and fruitless wishes about what they ought to be, as if they were not yet warranted to put their spiritual interests into the Redeemer's hands; and, instead of believing on the simple testimony of God, that the gospel makes to them personally a free offer of a full salvation, they may be seeking a confirmation of this truth in a certain undefinable evidence derived from something in themselves. If the question were directly and undisguisedly put to them, whether they believe that any qualifications are required in them, in the way of righteousness or merit, before they are authorized to believe on Christ for salvation, they would probably reject such an idea, as utterly repugnant to the whole scope and tenor of the gospel. And yet they may at the

very moment be acting as if such qualifications were necessary; they may, under the semblance of humility and self-abasement, be laying restrictions on the overtures of the gospel, which the gospel itself has not imposed; they may be refusing to enter into a state of reconciliation with God, on the ground that it is presumptuous in them thus to treat with the high and the holy one of Israel; and instead of experiencing the animating hope of ultimately triumphing in their warfare with sin—the hope which a sense of the divine favour never fails to impart—they may have been long laboriously struggling to reach the point, at which they may think themselves warranted to close with the proposals of pardon tendered to them in the gospel. It is thus, as the experience of many can testify, that error on the subject of the sinner's justification is identified with unbelief; and it is thus that a conflict with sin, even when some degree of hatred against it has been awakened in the mind, will always be a discouraging or a hopeless one, so long as the sinner has not come to something like a decision on the question of his reconciliation and acceptance with God.

It cannot, we trust, be supposed, that by these remarks we mean to insinuate, that the sinner is under no obligation, or need give himself no concern about forsaking sin, and abandoning every practice that is inconsistent with the purity of

the divine law, until he has actually been reconciled to God, and has attained to that peace of conscience which faith alone can impart. The authority of the law of God is of universal and unalterable obligation; and there is not perhaps any way in which a more gross or open insult can be offered to its purity and perfection, than by supposing that this obligation can, in any circumstances, or on any pretext, be dispensed with. When we endeavour to show, therefore, that a cheerful obedience to this law, and a growing conformity to its spirit, can result only from faith in Christ, we refer, not to what the sinner owes in the way of submission to its requirements, but to what, in point of fact, is found to be the source in which all cheerful submission originates; and we speak the language both of Scripture and of experience when we say, that till the spirit of bondage has been succeeded by the spirit of adoption, and till the sinner feels that he has been brought from under the condemning sentence of the divine law, that law will be felt only to be a hard task-master, whose authority may sometimes constrain its subjects into an external conformity, but will never call forth the willing and cheerful homage of the heart. But though it be felt only as a task-master, its authority is not on that account the less absolute, nor its sanctions the less sacred; and so far from its being any excuse to the impenitent and unbeliev-

ing, that they cannot yield a cheerful obedience to its demands, because it is the law of a being whom they dread as an enemy, it is just their maintaining the attitude of hostility to God, in spite of his readiness to be reconciled, that constitutes the strength of their guilt, and will prove the ground of their condemnation. Nor would it be less irrational than it is impious to suppose, that because the sinner never can work out a righteousness for himself, and never will attain to a permanent peace of conscience by any obedience of his own, therefore there rests upon him no obligation to forsake sin, till the moment that he has secured his acceptance with God. To avow such a sentiment, and to act on such a principle, is deliberately to declare his determination of never being reconciled to his Maker; for it is utterly impossible, in the nature of things, that any man can be seriously seeking to be brought from under the condemnation, which the violated law of God has passed upon him, while he is wilfully putting forth his hand to the commission of any known sin, or habitually living in the neglect of any known duty.

When the unbeliever, therefore, is told, that no virtuous doings of his will ever secure to him the divine favour, he has no grounds to infer that a licence is thereby given him to indulge in sin, and that he is under no obligation to cultivate personal holiness, till the moment he becomes

a believer. Equally groundless, too, is another, and a different sort of objection, that has often been urged, and as often refuted, that faith in the righteousness of Christ, as the only ground of the sinner's acceptance, has a tendency to relax his efforts in bringing his heart and life into a conformity with the moral precepts of the gospel. That no professing Christian has ever acted upon this principle, or presumed on his supposed faith in Christ, as setting him free from certain moral obligations, we do not venture to assert; for where is there a wholesome truth, or a salutary doctrine, from which the depravity or the deceitfulness of the human heart has not contrived to extract a poison? But while the whole scope and tenor of Scripture exposes the fallacy of such a speculation, it is practically contradicted by experience; and if there be any one truth which the united testimony of believers establishes more clearly than another, it is just this, that they never knew what cheerful and devoted obedience was, till they became partakers of everlasting consolation and good hope through grace. It is to this point that all the preceding observations on the passage before us have been directed; and it is unnecessary, therefore, to enter at greater length on the general question. But it is impossible to avoid asking, whether it be at all conceivable, that the man who is deeply impressed with the absolute necessity of triumphing over

his spiritual enemies, would be tempted to withdraw from the conflict, by being assured that his persevering exertions will infallibly be crowned with success? and that, in order to persuade him to maintain the contest, it is necessary to throw him into doubt or despair regarding the final result? Yet such, as every believer knows, is the strange assertion involved in the objection to which we refer; and such is the conclusion that must be established, before it can be shown, that the doctrine of acceptance, by faith in the Redeemer's righteousness, is hostile to the practice of virtue, and the cultivation of personal holiness.

The proof of these remarks is strikingly proved, and beautifully illustrated, by the example in the text; and we have only to advert to that example to see how it is, that the man who has passed from a state of enmity into a state of favour with God, is put in possession of a principle which can never fail to animate him with new vigour in every season of difficulty, and minister strength to every holy purpose. The condition of such a man is similar to what we may conceive Gideon's to have been, when God vouchsafed to grant him the token which he had requested, to satisfy him that he was indeed destined to be the deliverer of his country. The moment that token was granted him, his resolution was taken; the utter overthrow and destruction of the enemies of Israel was the only limit which he set to his patriotic

exertions; short of this point, he neither saw nor desired a resting place; difficulties, and what the world would have called disasters, served but to inspire him with new ardour, and arm him with new energy; and we find him in the text persevering in spite of obstacles, with which his faithless countrymen would soon have ceased to contend. And so it is also with the believer. While the consciousness of having been brought into a new relation to God, even the relation of a penitent child to a compassionate and forgiving father, allays the terrors that once distracted him, and removes the pressure of that hopeless and desponding feeling that mingled with the most sincere and the most laborious of his efforts to yield obedience to the divine law; it becomes also a matter of experience with him, that the enjoyment of the divine favour necessarily involves in it deliverance from the power and the pollution of sin; and to suppose that he can sit down contented under the reigning influence of any one unsanctified principle, or deliberately give himself up to any one unholy practice, would be just as revolting to him as to suppose, that he could consent to be again involved in all the darkness from which he has just been delivered, and to remain in a state of hopeless captivity to the enemies from which he now sees a sure way of escape. Is it a conceivable thing that Gideon, after receiving all the pledges that he himself

required, in confirmation of the divine promise, and after expressing his perfect satisfaction with these pledges, as conveying to his mind the full assurance of a complete victory, could have remained in the same state of indolence and inactivity, into which the overwhelming power of his enemies had crushed him, and in which he had been so long held bound by the depressing idea that God had abandoned his people; or that he could allege, as a reason for his inactivity, that the divine promise being pledged to secure a triumph over the Midianites, no personal exertions of his were required to bring about its fulfilment? As little can it be conceived, that the man who has become partaker of everlasting consolation and good hope through grace, can remain indifferent or inactive in his warfare, or surrender himself to the delusion, that he is not personally concerned in the overthrow of that debasing influence which sin has acquired, and so long exercised over him. He cannot separate between his acquittal from the condemnation of the law, and his ultimate conformity to its spirit; the very idea of such a separation involves, in his apprehension, a palpable contradiction; he feels that the spiritual adversaries that have taken possession of his heart and affections, not only ought to be resisted, but must be driven out; and to suppose that he can deliberately make a compromise with these adversaries, is to suppose that he

is ready to relinquish what he has felt to be a full and satisfying portion.

There is no difficulty, then, in perceiving how it is that faith in Christ—that faith by which the soul is enabled to repose in peace on the righteousness of the Redeemer—while it delivers the believer from the spirit of bondage and of fear inseparable from the suspicion with which he contemplated God in the days of his unbelief, brings with it, at the same time, a motive to the cultivation of personal holiness, which no other consideration could ever furnish. Wherever this work of faith has been wrought by the power and spirit of God, the sinner will feel that he has been set free from a restraint which fettered and impeded him in all his former endeavours to obey the divine law, and that, whatever difficulties he may still have to contemplate, there is nothing now to overwhelm him in despondency. His obedience will from that moment assume an alacrity and a cheerfulness to which he was formerly a stranger; and though he is every day acquiring a deeper insight into the evil and malignity of sin, and more enlarged views of the extent and spirituality of the divine law—views which at one time would have filled him with hopeless dejection—he will every day be aspiring after a nearer conformity to its purity and perfection. The full effects of this liberation, indeed, may not appear to the world; for the world can

know but little of the persevering and the successful struggle which the believer maintains with the sinful propensities of a corrupted heart. But let him be subjected to some such trial as Gideon was, on the occasion mentioned in the text—let him be brought into actual and visible contact with what is sinful around him—and let him be placed in circumstances where his principles may be embodied in active opposition to sin—and it will be found that the ultimate object of his pursuit is just as clearly and intelligibly defined as Gideon's was; that he, too, has formed the deliberate and fixed resolution of taking up no resting-place, nor being satisfied with any attainment short of a perfect resemblance to the image of the Son of God; and that the object which constitutes the great business of his life is too unequivocal to be misunderstood. The believer, indeed, is not warranted to expect that there will be nothing painful, and nothing discouraging, in this spiritual warfare. On the contrary, he is warned of snares, and temptations, and trials, that beset him on every side; and at every step of his progress he will find that warning in one form or another realized. But it is just in this way that he is led to have recourse to the great motive from which he is continually to gather new encouragement, and to betake himself to that strength, in the faith of which he commenced his conflict, and by the supply of which alone he can finish it in

triumph. When Gideon entered upon his undertaking, he did not perhaps foresee all the difficulties which he was destined to encounter, or the many discouragements with which he should be obliged to contend—the faithless desertion of one portion of his army, and the subsequent reduction of the remainder—the difficult and protracted pursuit with which he was obliged to follow up his first victory—and the unfeeling scoff with which his false-hearted brethren derided him, when he besought a little food for his faint and exhausted followers. And what was it that supported and animated him under all these trials and disappointments? It was his firm dependance on that faithfulness which never disappointed any who honestly and unreservedly confided in it; and so long as he felt assured that this faithfulness was pledged for his success, no such disappointment could either arrest his progress, or divert him from his purpose. And need we dwell on the practical lesson hereby conveyed to the believer, or urge upon him the necessity of holding fast the beginning of his confidence unto the end? They who have already experienced joy and peace in believing, cannot surely require to be reminded, that this peace can only be maintained by a life of faith on the Son of God; and that, should it be at any time disturbed, and followed, as it must unavoidably be in such a case, by discouragement and depression in their journey

Zion-ward, it can only be re-established by a renewed acceptance of Christ, as he is offered in the gospel.

But we would especially urge this application of the subject on the young and the inexperienced, —those who may be drawing their encouragement more from the countenance and the support of Christian friends, and less from the habitual exercise of a confiding dependance on Christ, than they are themselves aware of. We would entreat such persons to beware, lest they should be contentedly leaving in any sort of doubt the question of their acceptance with God ; and we would warn them, that though they may now be seeking to be separated from the world on many points where its maxims and practices stand in opposition to the gospel, yet that separation never will be fully effected, nor will they ever be secured against a return to it, till they have been brought to an unreserved and unhesitating surrender of themselves to the Redeemer, as all their righteousness and all their salvation. To some, the whole of this representation may appear a formidable one ; and the Christian life may present to them so alarming a prospect of painful exertion and perilous trials, that they may be disposed to remain contented as they are, and to congratulate themselves, that they do not stand pledged to an undertaking surrounded with so many difficulties, and bringing with it so many anxie-

ties. It is no doubt true, that to the carnal mind the whole aspect of the Christian life is revolting, and to the eye of unbelief every obstacle that it presents may appear insurmountable. But we would ask such persons, whether they are aware of what is really implied in such a determination as they have formed? or whether they can seriously suppose that they are safe, merely because they are insensible to danger? By yielding to the suggestions of sin, they may indeed escape the painful conflict of resisting it; and by making no pretensions to a religious character, they may fancy themselves at liberty to indulge propensities which it is the business of the believer's life to mortify and subdue. But do they really believe that they will as easily ward off the consequences of sin hereafter, as they can shake themselves free from any struggle with it here? Will they venture to plead, in arrest of judgment, the very guilt on which that judgment is passed? Or can they persuade themselves that it is less alarming to abide the consequences of having God for ever their enemy, than to engage, under his protection and promised aid, in a life of devoted and determined opposition to sin? There is no other alternative to those who, in despite of all the manifestations of divine love, continue to reject the counsel of God against themselves; and if it would have been folly and infatuation in the case of Gideon, rather to en-

dure the oppression of the Midianites, and to incur the still heavier calamities with which an offended God might have visited Israel, than submit to the privations and difficulties of the expedition which he was commanded to undertake, and for the success of which a divine promise was pledged; how unspeakably more melancholy is the infatuation, and how inconceivably more disastrous will be the fate of those who choose rather to abide the coming terrors of the Almighty, than, by accepting the proposals of his mercy, and entering into reconciliation with him through the atoning blood of his Son, to engage in a conflict, where, notwithstanding all its severity, the victory is sure, and the prize will be eternal!

SERMON XV.

THE HUMBLEST BELIEVER AN INSTRUMENT OF GOOD.

2 KINGS v. 3.

And she said unto her mistress, Would God my lord were with the prophet that is in Samaria! for he would recover him of his leprosy.

IT is frequently and very distinctly stated in Scripture, that the great object of all God's interpositions on behalf of Israel, considered with a reference to the existing state of the world, at the time these interpositions took place, was to demonstrate the divine supremacy, and to sanctify his great name in the sight of the heathen. Thus we find God declaring by the mouth of the prophet Jeremiah, that he had chosen and separated unto himself the family of Abraham, that "they might be unto him for a people, and for a name, and for a praise, and for a glory;" and when at a future period he commissioned Ezekiel to reprove Israel for their ingratitude, by enumerating the many deliverances that he had wrought

on their behalf, and reminding them how frequently he had turned away his anger, notwithstanding their provocations, he expressly assigned the manifestation of his own glory, as the reason of all the forbearance which he exercised towards them, from his first interposition for them in the land of Egypt, till the day that they were carried captive into the land of Babylon. "I wrought," said he, and the declaration is repeatedly made in the same chapter, "I wrought for my name's sake, that it should not be polluted before the heathen, among whom they were, in whose sight I made myself known unto them, in bringing them forth out of the land of Egypt."

Nor was it only at a late period of the history of the Israelites, that these great purposes of the divine dispensations were fully stated and explained. It appears from various passages in the writings of Moses, that he was fully aware of this leading principle of God's procedure towards the Israelites; and, in proof of this, I need only refer to the use which he made of it in the marvellous intercession, or I might almost say remonstrance, which he presented to God, on behalf of that rebellious people, when the divine displeasure was ready to break forth against them, and consume them. "How long," said the Lord unto Moses, referring to the infatuated purpose which the Israelites had formed of returning into Egypt, on hearing the report of the spies respecting the

difficulty of taking possession of Canaan, and to the violence which they manifested against Joshua and Caleb who opposed that purpose—"how long will this people provoke me? and how long will it be ere they believe me, for all the signs which I have showed among them? I will smite them with the pestilence, and disinherit them, and will make of thee a greater nation and mightier than they. And Moses said unto the Lord, then the Egyptians shall hear it, (for thou broughtest up this people in thy might from among them,) and they will tell it to the inhabitants of this land: for they have heard that thou, Lord, art among this people; that thou, Lord, art seen face to face; and that thy cloud standeth over them; and that thou goest before them, by day-time in a pillar of a cloud, and in a pillar of fire by night. Now, if thou shalt kill all this people as one man, then the nations which have heard the fame of thee will speak, saying, Because the Lord was not able to bring this people into the land which he sware unto them, therefore he hath slain them in the wilderness. And now, I beseech thee pardon the iniquity of this people, according unto the greatness of thy mercy, and as thou hast forgiven this people from Egypt even until now. And the Lord said, I have pardoned, according to thy word; but as truly as I live, all the earth shall be filled with the glory of the Lord."

It was thus that God was pleased to identify

the honour of his name, and the supremacy of his government, with the prosperity of Israel—it was for this purpose that "he put the fear of them, and the dread of them," upon all the nations that were round about, and raised them to the highest elevation of prosperity and power under the reign of David and Solomon—and when he foretold, by the mouth of his holy prophets, the deliverance that he was yet to work for his people, when he should turn again the captivity of Judah, and bring them from Babylon to Jerusalem, it was still the manifestation of his supremacy as the only living and true God, that he assigned as the reason of that gracious interposition. "Thus saith the Lord God, I do not this for your sakes, O house of Israel, but for mine holy name's sake, which ye have profaned among the heathen, whither ye went. And I will sanctify my great name, which was profaned among the heathen, which ye have profaned in the midst of them; and the heathen shall know that I am the Lord, saith the Lord God, when I shall be sanctified in you before their eyes."

It is necessary, I apprehend, that the consideration to which I have thus adverted be kept distinctly in view in perusing the history of God's dealings with the children of Israel; especially if we would attempt to estimate the true character of that apostacy to which they were so prone, and on account of which they were so frequently

brought into trouble. To say that they requited the manifold interpositions of divine power on their behalf, with something worse than insensibility or indifference; that they treated the threatenings of God with contempt, and his promises as unworthy of credit; and that they transferred their confidence from the Lord of hosts, whose arm had been so often made bare in their defence, to the false gods of the nations against whose idolatry and impieties they were commissioned to execute the divine displeasure, is all true: and the statement presents such a combination of ingratitude, infatuation, and unbelief, as may appear to us not only unexampled, but almost incredible. This, however, is not the only light in which we must contemplate their apostacy, if we would conceive aright of its aggravated guilt. If God was pleased to identify the manifestation of his sovereignty with the prosperity of Israel—if he separated and set them up as a monument of his mighty power, to give intimation to the rest of the world of his supremacy, and to assert his prerogative as the only object of religious worship—and if it was by sustaining them in this lofty attitude, as the executioners of his righteous judgments, that he had chosen to put forth his power for the punishment or the overthrow of idolatry; then every defeat which Israel sustained, and every advantage which their enemies gained over them, was a temporary

suspension of the great work which they had been set apart to execute; and when, by their obstinate perseverance in rebellion, they drew down upon themselves those chastisements which the rectitude of the divine government rendered necessary, they were actually bringing a calumny upon the divine character—throwing a suspicion on the power or the faithfulness of God—and causing his great name to be profaned among the heathen.

It is no doubt true, that there was in the calamities by which they were at times overtaken a most unequivocal demonstration both of the power and the faithfulness of God; and now that we can contemplate their history as a whole, and see its connexion with the more complete development of the divine purposes, it is just in his occasionally withholding from them his holy protection, that we see the most striking proofs of the divine wisdom, and provision made for a still brighter display of the divine power. But it is never to be forgotten, that this was not the light in which the discomfiture of the Israelites was contemplated at the time, by those nations that were made the instruments of their chastisement. These nations were well aware, that the religion of the inhabitants of Judea stood opposed to the worship which they paid to their gods; they regarded their conflict with Israel as in reality a conflict with the God of Israel; and

every victory, therefore, which they gained, they ascribed to the power and superiority of their idols. It was thus that the Philistines, when they had smitten the armies of Israel, and had taken the ark of God, which had been presumptuously brought into the field of battle, carried it in triumph to the temple of their idol, and placed it by Dagon their god. It was thus that Sennacherib, king of Assyria, insultingly exclaimed, when he lay before Jerusalem with his army, "Who was there among all the gods of those nations, that my fathers utterly destroyed, that could deliver his people out of mine hand, that your God should be able to deliver you out of mine hand?" And it was thus that the judgments of God were denounced against the children of Ammon, and others of the heathen, "because," said the Lord by the mouth of his prophet, "thou saidst, Aha, against my sanctuary, when it was profaned; and against the land of Israel, when it was desolate; and against the house of Judah, when they went into captivity. Because thou hast clapped thine hands, and stamped with the feet, and rejoiced in heart with all thy despite against the land of Israel." In the season of adversity, therefore, the children of Israel had not only to look back on the forfeiture of the richest privileges which a people had ever enjoyed, and the most aggravated rebellion with which a people had ever been chargeable;

but they had also to bear the bitter reflection, that by the very circumstance of their being in a state of adversity, they were at the moment calumniating the divine character—that in being brought into subjection to their enemies, they threw a suspicion over the divine sovereignty, and furnished grounds for idolatry to triumph—and that there was thus guilt, so to speak, in their very captivity, inasmuch as they thereby profaned the name of God among the heathen, and gave occasion to the enemies of the Lord to blaspheme.

I have dwelt the longer on this general view of the principle of the divine economy towards the Jews, because I conceive it is calculated to place in a very striking light the wisdom and the power of God, as manifested in the incident recorded in the text. That incident took place during the reign of Jehoram, the son of Ahab, king of Israel, who, like all the other successors of Jeroboam, the first king of the ten tribes, did that which was evil in the sight of the Lord—pursuing the same line of policy that Jeroboam had adopted, to secure a permanent separation between Israel and Judah, and which was one day to terminate in the utter overthrow of the kingdom. Respecting the personal character of Jehoram, it were enough to know, what we find stated in a preceding chapter, that he wrought evil in the sight of the Lord, though not, indeed, like Ahab, his father, of whom it is said, that he

sold himself to work wickedness in the sight of the Lord; and respecting the general principles of his administration, it might be sufficient to remark, that, instead of asking counsel of God before entering upon a warlike enterprise, and thereby recognising the manifestations of the divine supremacy, as the great object of every such enterprise, he proclaimed war against Moab to recover the tribute which had been formerly paid to him, and called unto his aid the kings of Judah and of Edom. In doing so, he virtually declared, that, instead of esteeming it his honour and security to act under the guidance of divine counsel, and the protection of divine power, he considered the armies of Israel as placed at his disposal for his own aggrandizement alone; and, consequently, he disavowed the authority of God just as distinctly as the heathen did, against whom he was commissioned to maintain that authority.

But there are other circumstances stated in the same passage, which serve to place in a still clearer light, both the character of the king, and the condition of the nation generally, at the period referred to in the text. When Jehoram and his allies had actually entered on their expedition against the king of Moab, they soon found themselves exposed to great hardship, having advanced seven days' journey through the wilderness of Edom, where there was no water for the

host, and for the cattle that followed them. And yet, though thus reduced to the last extremity, and even constrained to cry out "Alas! that the Lord hath called these three kings together, to deliver them into the hand of Moab," so blind was the king of Israel to what constituted the real strength of his kingdom, that he never once proposed to make application to the man of God who was in the host, until the king of Judah asked whether there was not there a prophet of the Lord, that they might inquire of the Lord by him—and till one of Jehoram's own servants said unto him, "here is Elisha, the Son of Shaphat, which poured water on the hands of Elijah." The same view of his character is also exhibited, and still more strikingly, in the interview that took place between the three sovereigns and the man of God; for we are told, that when the king of Israel, and Jehoshaphat, and the king of Edom, went down to him, "Elisha said unto the king of Israel, What have I to do with thee? Get thee to the prophets of thy father, and to the prophets of thy mother." "As the Lord of hosts liveth, before whom I stand, surely, were it not that I regard the presence of Jehoshaphat, the king of Judah, I would not look toward thee, nor see thee." From all this it is abundantly evident, that the great purpose for which Israel had been separated from the other nations of the world—invested with a power that was fitted to

inspire fear and dread into the heathen around them—and placed under a constitution over which God himself vouchsafed to preside, was no subject of concern with the king of Israel or his counsellors; that they had forgotten or disregarded the conditions of that tenure by which they held the possession of Canaan; and that there virtually existed a general conspiracy, on the part of the subjects of Jehoram's government, to defeat the execution of the divine purposes.

Such was the state of things in the kingdom of Israel when God interposed to vindicate his supremacy, and sanctify his name among the heathen, through the instrumentality of one who, but for such an interposition, might have lived and died in a state of unknown and unpitied captivity. The personal history of that individual furnished one proof among many, that Israel had already fallen from that elevated and commanding position which, as a nation, she was designed to occupy; inasmuch as the successful inroad of the Syrians referred to in the context, was a solemn intimation to the Israelites that their defence was beginning to depart from them. "The Syrians," it is said, "had gone out by companies, and had brought away captive out of the land of Israel a little maid, and she waited on Naaman's wife." The very captivity, indeed, of such a person, however little it might be felt or lamented by an apostate king and his rebellious subjects, was itself a

diminution of their national strength; inasmuch as there had been thereby removed one of the few who had not forsaken the Lord, nor broken the covenant of the God of their fathers. But though she was thus permitted to participate in the calamity with which the apostacy of Israel was visited, she was not thereby removed beyond the protection or the notice of that gracious God in whom she appears to have confided; and whatever reason she had to lament the backsliding and disobedience of her countrymen, that very calamity was to render her the honoured instrument of bringing into view the sovereignty of the God of Israel, in a way that we cannot conceive her ever to have done, had she never been removed from the land of her fathers. With a simple and affectionate concern for the affliction of a master whom she appears to have loved—with a knowledge of the character of Elisha, which formed a striking contrast to the blindness and insensibility of the king of Israel—and with a confidence in the power and condescension of God, that was but rarely exemplified among her brethren, she gave utterance to the benevolent wish in the text, "Would God my lord were with the prophet that is in Samaria! for he would recover him of his leprosy;" and, under the control of an over-ruling providence, this wish was not expressed in vain. Instead of treating it as the expression of an extravagant partiality for

her own country, or a childish veneration for the character of one whom she had been taught to revere, her lord was so far impressed with it as to request permission of his sovereign to make trial of the prophet's power; and not only did the latter assent to it, but in order, as he no doubt supposed, the better to secure the prophet's interposition, he sent his servant to the king of Israel, with all the pomp and solemnity of a royal embassy, "saying, now, when this letter is come unto thee, behold, I have therewith sent Naaman my servant to thee, that thou mayest recover him of his leprosy."

And here it is impossible to avoid noticing the hand of God, so over-ruling the circumstances of this event, as to minister the most severe and salutary reproof to the king of Israel. While an obscure individual of his subjects, whom his own apostacy had driven into exile, urged the heathen master whom she served to make application for relief to the man of God at Samaria—confident that a divine power would assuredly be forthcoming to meet this appeal to the prophet—the king himself, with a faint-heartedness ill befitting him who ruled over God's heritage, was overwhelmed in dismay by that application; and the language in which he expressed his fears betrayed his faithlessness and distrust with regard to the divine protection. "It came to pass," we are told, "when the king of Israel had read the

letter, that he rent his clothes, and said, Am I God, to kill and to make alive, that this man doth send unto me to recover a man of his leprosy? Wherefore, consider, I pray you, and see how he seeketh a quarrel against me." Though he had once before experienced the interposition of Elisha in the hour of extremity, he was still as insensible as ever to the value of the prophet's counsel; nor does it appear that he ever thought of having recourse to his aid, or even to recollect that he had such a resource to which he might betake himself, till the man of God, hearing of the king's perplexity, sent to him the dignified message recorded in the context: "Wherefore hast thou rent thy clothes? let him come now to me, and he shall know that there is a prophet in Israel." It is unnecessary at present minutely to detail the remainder of this interesting history. The result was the cure of the leper, in such a way as to furnish unequivocal evidence of a divine power, and to produce a solemn recognition of that power on the part of the leper himself; and thus was the humble individual spoken of in our text honoured, amidst the general degeneracy of her countrymen, to bring about one of the most striking demonstrations of the divine supremacy, and to call forth from a heathen one of the most explicit acknowledgments of the sovereignty of the God of Israel, that the history of that people has recorded. "Behold," said Naaman,

when he returned with all his company to the man of God, "Behold now I know that there is no God in all the earth but in Israel; now, therefore, I pray thee, take a blessing of thy servant."

The incident to which our attention has now been directed is full of interest and of instruction, even when considered simply with a reference to the parties concerned. But, when viewed in connexion with the leading object of the divine procedure towards Israel, and with the state of that people at the time it took place, it assumes a magnitude and an importance that place it among the most striking of God's interpositions for the vindication of his honour, and the assertion of his inalienable prerogative. And after what has already been stated, it is only necessary, I conceive, to hint at the practical lesson which it suggests, and which many, I doubt not, have already anticipated. To Christians, even the humblest and most obscure, it cannot fail to minister largely in the way both of encouragement and of comfort; and to go far towards removing the idea which will be ready to steal upon them, when they contemplate the narrow sphere to which they are appointed, that they have neither the means nor the opportunity of contributing in any degree to the advancement of truth and righteousness, and to the spiritual interests of their fellow-men. If such a feeling of hopelessness could ever have been warrantably indulged, and apparently on good

grounds, it was assuredly in the case of the individual here spoken of; for whether we consider her condition in life, or the circumstances in which she was placed, what reasonable hope could she entertain, that an humble and helpless captive, as she was, could ever be instrumental in vindicating the authority of the divine government, and drawing from the highest subject of the heathen country in which she lived as a slave, a solemn acknowledgment of the supremacy of the God of Israel? We cannot, indeed, suppose that she contemplated all the consequences of the feeble effort that she made in the cause of truth, or that she had ever aspired to be the chief agent in an enterprise of any great magnitude. But it is just on this account that her example admits of a more extended application; and when, in all the artlessness of affectionate sympathy in the sufferings of a fellow-creature, and with implicit confidence in the power and faithfulness of God to vindicate the character, and bear testimony to the divine commission of his prophet, we see her directing her master to a resource which the false gods of Syria could not furnish, but which she felt assured of his finding in the God of Israel; we are reminded that a similar course of procedure is within the reach of every believer, be his condition and circumstances in life what they may. I am well aware that it is unspeakably more difficult to draw the attention of mankind to what

concerns their spiritual state, than to awaken their interest in what may minister to their temporal comfort; and that multitudes will gladly hear how their bodily sufferings may be alleviated, who would turn away as from an unwelcome and offensive subject, did we proceed to tell them of the one only efficacious remedy for their spiritual disease. But were Christians careful to cherish an affectionate concern for the eternal interests of those with whom they are connected; did they study to maintain and to manifest that meekness of temper and character, which is itself fitted to disarm the opposition of gainsayers; did they give, by their ordinary conduct, as substantial evidence of their sincere regard for those whom they wish to benefit, as the Israelitish maid did of fidelity and affection to her heathen master; and did they act with the same simplicity of mind and singleness of heart that she did, in tendering their spiritual advice; might they not reckon with more confidence than they are conscious of having yet done, on the success of their efforts? might they not commit the cause of God into his own hand, with something like an assurance that he would not fail to give testimony to the word of his grace? and though they may be able to do little more for others than merely to tell them that there is a balm in Gilead, an almighty physician there, yet might they not cherish the hope that some might thereby be prompted to ap-

ply where none ever applied in vain? Nor can there be wanting opportunities of doing so, to any of us who are willing to embrace them. However reluctant sinners may be to entertain spiritual subjects in the season of health, and amidst the abundance of temporal comforts, there are times in the mental history of all, when a void is felt that the world cannot fill up, a longing of spirit which the world cannot satisfy—times when the leprosy of sin will make itself be felt as a deep and deadly disease; and had we previously gained their confidence by unequivocal tokens of sincere regard for their best interests, who can venture to calculate the amount of the influence which might be vouchsafed to our humble and believing efforts, did we at such seasons present to them the great efficacious remedy that reaches every case, and every state of spiritual malady—and by affectionately directing them to the love, and the power, and the grace of the Saviour, address them in the spirit at least, if not in the language of the text, "Would God my lord were with the prophet in Samaria! for he would recover him of his leprosy."

But the passage that we have been considering suggests encouragement and comfort to believers in another, and somewhat different department of Christian duty. In perusing the interesting history before us, the question naturally occurs, how the individual, who originated the important transaction which it records, came to form

so correct an estimate of the prophet, whom an irreligious king and a degenerate people seemed to treat with indifference or neglect? and how it was, that she so confidently reckoned on a divine power being assuredly forthcoming, to sustain the prophet's character in the appeal that was about to be made to him? And though we are not at liberty to make suppositions in reply to this question, beyond what has been recorded, yet I think we are warranted to infer, that her faith and her knowledge were, under the blessing of God, to be ascribed to a religious education. The expression in the context would seem to imply, that she was still at an early period of life, while the whole history of the times bears witness to the general and growing degeneracy of her country: and we are almost irresistibly led, therefore, to the conclusion, that it was in the sanctuary of a family who called on the name of the Lord in which she had escaped the contagion of that spiritual pestilence which was withering the strength of Israel; that there she had been instructed, in some, at least, of those truths which the Israelites had been commanded to teach diligently unto their children, talking of them when they sat in the house, and when they walked by the way, when they lay down, and when they rose up; and that there she had learned to recognise and revere the mighty power of God, as manifested in the person of his prophet. And if

such was the fact, then how largely was that family honoured to contribute to the accomplishment of the great object for which Israel had been separated from the rest of the world, but which the nation, as if by general consent, had overlooked or forgotten! And how animating the encouragement hereby afforded to believers to labour for the spiritual welfare of their children! It is expressly declared, by him whose word cannot fail, that out of the mouths of babes and sucklings he perfecteth praise. Examples of this gracious truth are recorded in abundance in the Old Testament Scriptures. Our Lord himself has assured us, that such examples shall be neither less frequent nor less striking under the clearer revelation of the gospel; and where is the Christian who has not seen the promise fulfilled within the circle of his own observation?

The truth of these remarks will be readily admitted; and I feel assured that I need not dwell upon the subject, with a view of exciting and encouraging believers to renewed diligence on behalf of those in whose welfare they are immediately concerned, nor attempt to estimate the extent to which they may be honoured, in contributing to the prevalence of truth and righteousness in the world, by the faithful discharge of parental duty. But there are others besides those of their own house, to whose spiritual well-being they may have opportunities of contribut-

ing, and whose claim to their friendly and affectionate regard, I would urge by the considerations that have already been stated. I need hardly remark, that I allude to those who must be indebted in a great measure, if not altogether, for religious education to one or other of the various institutions which Christian benevolence has formed for the instruction of the rising generation, and which Christian liberality alone can sustain in active operation. Few, I believe, will hesitate to admit, that the necessity of some such device, for meeting the moral and spiritual wants of a large class of the community, has been daily becoming more urgent, and that it is the application of a remedy to a most alarming and rapidly accumulating evil. And if there has been a growing degeneracy in the character of one portion, at least, of our community, is it not an intimation to us, as the inroads of the Syrians were to Israel of old, that our strength and our defence are beginning to depart from us? And is not every Christian called upon to place himself in the breach, to stand between the dead and the living, that the plague may be stayed? It was for this purpose, and with these views, that Sabbath and other schools were first established, and have since been carried on: and without incurring the charge of being extravagantly sanguine, may we not hope that, by the blessing of God, they will send forth many who are hereafter to constitute

the strength and the security of our country—many who will carry with them a salutary influence among the ignorant of other lands, or the unregenerate of our own—and who may be honoured to bear as real, though, perhaps, not such palpable testimony to the truth, as was done by the person referred to in our text? And are there not facts within the knowledge of multitudes, sufficient to prove that such are the fruits that have already been brought forth by the institutions of which I speak? Are there not cases in which the light that emanates from a Sabbath school has penetrated the dark recesses of ignorance and indifference? has not the child who there first heard of a Saviour's name and a Saviour's work, been honoured to carry the glad tidings to his father's house? and are there not many who have with all humility and gratitude acknowledged, that they received their first impressions of divine truth from those whom they were bound to have made acquainted with that truth? And if ever the case stated in our text is to be exemplified among ourselves, is it possible to conceive how it can be done in a more interesting or affecting way, than when a believing child shall, in all the simplicity and ardour of filial affection, lead a trembling and convicted parent to the great physician, and shall be instrumental in administering that sovereign remedy whereby the leprosy of sin may be healed?

SERMON XVI.

FREE GRACE ILLUSTRATED IN THE HISTORY OF NAAMAN.

2 KINGS v. 13.

And his servants came near, and spake unto him, and said, My father, if the prophet had bid thee do some great thing, wouldest thou not have done it? how much rather, then, when he saith to thee, wash, and be clean?

THE preceding context informs us, that Naaman, the person to whom the words of our text were addressed, was captain of the host of the king of Syria; that he was a great man with his master, and honourable, and also a mighty man in valour; but that he was a leper. It tells us farther, that there was in his service a little maid of the land of Israel, who had been carried captive by a company of Syrians, and placed in attendance on Naaman's wife; that this humble individual expressed a wish to her mistress, that her lord were with the prophet Elisha in Samaria, for that he would recover him of his leprosy; and that Naaman wisely determined, with the consent of

his royal master, to make trial of what he probably regarded as the last experiment, for the cure of a most offensive and hitherto hopeless disease. But though the very circumstance of his listening to the advice of his servant amounted to an acknowledgment on his part, that the God of Israel, of whose name he could not be altogether ignorant, might do for him what the false gods of Syria had not been able to effect; yet his subsequent conduct proved, that he entertained but very inadequate and dishonourable views of the divine character, and very mistaken notions as to the influence that was required to secure the prophet's interposition on his behalf. He departed, we are told, taking with him ten talents of silver, and six thousand pieces of gold, and ten changes of raiment; and he moreover carried with him a letter from the king of Syria to the king of Israel; conceiving, no doubt, that, between the interference of royal authority, on the one hand, and the value of the presents which he had himself brought, on the other, he had made sure of obtaining a fair trial, at least, of the power and the skill of the prophet. His misapprehension, however, was soon to be rectified. The manifestation of God's sovereignty required, that the character of his servant should be placed above all such unworthy and impious suspicions; and while the king of Israel was left to feel his weakness and destitution, and to tremble under

the dread of the king of Syria, whose letter he regarded as only a pretext for seeking a quarrel against him, and whom, but for his own infidelity, he might have reckoned among his tributaries, Naaman was soon given to understand, that the prophet, whose interference he thought to purchase, was immeasureably removed above the dread of earthly power, or the influence of an earthly reward. "Wherefore," said Elisha, by a messenger to the king of Israel, "Wherefore hast thou rent thy clothes? let him come now to me, and he shall know that there is a prophet in Israel."

One step was thus taken towards convincing Naaman, that the influence which he solicited, and from which he expected relief, was not at the disposal of kings, and that, if he was cured of his leprosy, he must be a debtor for his recovery to one whom no authority could awe, nor any worldly consideration bribe. A great deal, however, was still required to humble him, and set him right with regard to his conceptions of the divine character; for though he did not openly resent the treatment which he experienced at the hand of Elisha, in sending him what he might have been disposed to consider a haughty message, his apparent humility may be accounted for from the fact, that the intimation which was made to him through the king of Israel, involved a promise that he should be healed; and however

mortifying to his pride, therefore, the manner of that intimation might be, the hope of deliverance which it held out was strong enough to secure his compliance with the prophet's invitation. "So Naaman," we are told, "came with his horses and with his chariot, and stood at the door of the house of Elisha." But the severest trial yet awaited him. He who had a little before been received with all the pomp and ceremony of a royal ambassador, and whose embassy had thrown the king of Israel and his court into a state of consternation, was now permitted to stand an humble supplicant at the door of a subject; and the prophet, in utter disregard of the personal dignity of his visitor, and the power of the sovereign who had sent him, instead of appearing in all the solemnity of his prophetic office to receive Naaman, and supplicate a divine interposition on his behalf, "sent a messenger unto him, saying, go and wash in Jordan seven times, and thy flesh shall come again to thee, and thou shalt be clean." This was more than the proud spirit of a heathen, trained up and tutored amidst the imposing forms of idolatrous worship, could brook. Accustomed to the pompous but unmeaning ceremonial of a debasing superstition, whereby he invoked the interposition of deities more impotent than their deluded votaries, he knew not what it was to confide in the word of the living God; and regarding the prophet's message as an insult,

he turned away in disappointment and indignation. "But Naaman," says the sacred historian, "was wroth, and went away saying, Behold, I said with myself, he will surely come out to me, and stand and call on the name of the Lord his God, and strike his hand over the place, and recover the leper. Are not Abana and Pharpar, rivers of Damascus, better than all the waters of Israel? may I not wash in them and be clean? So he turned, and went away in a rage." And it was in reply to this expression of mortified pride and disappointed hope, that his servants addressed him in the language of the text: "My father, if the prophet had bid thee do some great thing, wouldest thou not have done it? how much rather then, when he saith to thee, wash and be clean?"

It must be evident to every one who reads the passage with attention, that the cause of Naaman's dissatisfaction with the prophet's injunction, was his ignorance of the character of God—his utter incapacity so to conceive of the divine power as to believe, that an expedient so simple, or rather so trifling as that of washing seven times in Jordan, should effect the cure of a disease, which we cannot doubt had already baffled all the vain and impious incantations of his own superstition. In the absence of every thing like the solemnities that were wont to be observed in the service of his idols, there was nothing where-

on he could place his confidence, or out of which he could look for the emanation of a mysterious efficacy to heal him; and thus conceiving of the one only living and true God, as he had been accustomed to conceive of the gods of Syria, he regarded the prophet's message as mockery and insult. But every one must as readily perceive the wisdom and the grace of that method of procedure, which the prophet was directed to observe towards him. According to Naaman's own confession, he expected that Elisha would surely come out to him, and call on the name of the Lord his God, and strike his hand over the place, and recover the leper; and unquestionably it was quite competent for the prophet to have done so, and to have thereby effected a cure too, had such been the will and the appointment of God. But it is very obvious that if this method had been observed, there would have been a great deal in such a ceremonial to gratify Naaman's pride, and not a little to confirm him in his misconceptions respecting the divine character; that he would have considered the personal appearance of the prophet, as homage done either to his own dignity or to the power of his master, and the solemn invocation of the name of the Lord as necessary to give efficacy to the charm that was to heal him; and that going away with these impressions, he would have thought it enough to acknowledge the superiority of the God of Israel

on the single point where he experienced relief, and to assign to the prophet of Israel a somewhat loftier character, perhaps, than he was accustomed to ascribe to the high priest of Rimmon. This, however, would not have effected the great purpose of the divine interposition. The object of that interposition was neither to do honour to the king of Syria, nor yet to relieve the king of Israel from his fears and perplexities; but it was to verify the testimony which the Israelitish maid had borne to the supremacy of God, and to the character of his prophet, and thereby to sanctify in the sight of the heathen, that holy name which the king of Israel had profaned, not more by the general tenor of his ungodly policy, than by the very perplexity and dismay in which the message of the king of Syria had involved him. But to do this, it was necessary that no room should be left for making any sort of comparison between the interposition of the God of Israel, and the alleged interposition of the false gods of Syria; the vindication of Jehovah's character, and the assertion of his prerogative, required that his power and his authority should be manifested in a way that placed his sovereignty beyond all dispute; and it was necessary to teach those who sought counsel of his prophets, that his simple word was to be received with implicit credit, and unhesitating obedience. It was obviously on this ground that Naaman met

with so dignified, or as he no doubt thought it, so haughty a reception at the hand of Elisha; that by successive mortifications his pride might be humbled, and he might be brought to feel his nothingness in the sight of him whose power he had already, to a certain extent, acknowledged, but whose absolute supremacy he had not yet recognised. And with regard to the successful issue of the humbling discipline through which the prophet led him, we have only to refer to the following context, where the sacred historian informs us, that, yielding to the salutary counsel of his servants, Naaman "went down, and dipped himself seven times in Jordan, according to the commandment of the man of God;" and when he found that "his flesh came again like unto the flesh of a little child," and that "he was clean," "he returned to the man of God, he and all his company, and came and stood before him, and said, Behold, *now* I know that there is no God in all the earth but in Israel."

The history which we have thus shortly detailed, suggests some interesting and instructive reflections, whether we consider it as a delineation of the character of Naaman, or whether we view it as unfolding the principles of the divine administration towards the children of men. That mankind are sinners, is a matter of fact which does not admit of any dispute; and that in consequence of sin, many a grievous evil has

been entailed upon them is equally indisputable. Of these evils, the greatest, and that which lies at the foundation of all the rest, is unquestionably the separation of the soul from God—its incapacity for deriving gratification from the admiration of his character, or the imitation of his excellence—and its consequent subjection to the wretchedness of being found in a state of opposition to the holy and righteous principles of the divine government. With many, perhaps, there is no very distinct or adequate conception, either of the nature or the magnitude of this evil; and to this may be ascribed the indifference which multitudes show about finding an efficacious remedy. Among professing Christians, however, it will be universally admitted, that there is at least something wrong in our moral and spiritual constitution; and that some interposition too of a divine power is necessary to rectify the disorder: and did we represent sin, therefore, under the figure of a spiritual disease—the plague of our nature—the leprosy of the soul; or did we set forth the blood of Christ as the fountain in which alone the soul can be washed and made clean, there are probably few of our hearers who would not acquiesce generally in the truth of the statement. But it will be found, we suspect, that language like this is frequently heard and assented to, as announcing truth, while no very definite meaning is attached to it; and that on

coming into closer contact with individuals, and pressing them hard upon the point of their application to this fountain of mercy that has been opened for sin and uncleanness, we should, in many cases have the same difficulty to combat that the prophet had in the case of Naaman—that many would be disposed to turn away in wrath, because, instead of bidding them do some great thing, we had simply said unto them, "wash, and be clean." It is to mankind, as spiritually diseased, as labouring under a malady that has infected every principle of their moral nature, and robbed the soul of its capacity of spiritual enjoyment, that the gospel is addressed; and its professed object is to make known to them a heavenly and efficacious remedy for that disease. It tells them that this remedy is to be found in the blood of Christ, which cleanses from all sin; or, to state the sum and substance of the gospel message without a figure, it declares that, in consequence of the death of Christ, as an adequate expression of God's righteous abhorrence of sin, and a satisfactory vindication of his law from the suspicion of making any compromise with rebellion, forgiveness is freely preached to sinners; that is to say, tendered to them as an act of grace to which they never had, and never could have the shadow of a claim; that the sinner in receiving this testimony, and acquiescing in the proposals which it makes, enters into a state of friend-

ship and reconciliation with God; and that the Holy Spirit, by opening their eyes to the meaning, and their hearts to the love of the truth—removing their misapprehensions of the divine character, and bringing them under the constraining influence of the divine love, gradually delivers them from the debasement and pollution of sin, as they have already been from its guilt and condemnation. Such is the nature of that remedy which the gospel sets forth, and such the mode of its application; and when we urge sinners, therefore, to believe the gospel record, and declare, moreover, that it is by faith in Christ alone that they can be healed, we are virtually addressing them in the spirit of our text, "wash and be clean." The reception, however, which this proposal meets with, will in many cases be essentially the same as that which was given to it by Naaman; and though there will not be wanting arguments, and plausible ones too, whereby to justify the rejection of it; yet it will be found on inquiry, that the ground of offence is the same in all; that the simplicity and humbling nature of the scheme lie at the foundation of the dislike that is felt to it; and that if the doctrine of a free salvation by the cross of Christ is, to many an offensive doctrine, it is just because it gives us no warrant, and leaves us no room for bidding them do some great thing.

In farther illustration of these remarks, I would

advert for a little to the two leading points of view, in which God's method of dealing with sinners may be contemplated; in the first place, as it refers to the character of God himself; and in the second place, as it is fitted to influence and affect the character of sinners. On both these points, the scheme of a free unqualified forgiveness through the blood of Christ, independently of any consideration of personal righteousness on the part of the sinner, is objected to as defective, or perhaps something worse than defective, by those to whom that doctrine is offensive; and it may not be unprofitable shortly to inquire into the ground of this charge.

And with regard to the first, it is alleged that it would be unbefitting the character of God, and inconsistent with the rectitude of his moral administration, to proclaim forgiveness to his rebellious subjects, except on condition that some reparation were made, on their part, to the honour of the law which they had violated, and some such measure of personal worth attained to, as might justify their readmission into a state of favour with their offended sovereign. The objection, perhaps, is not in every case stated in so broad and unqualified a form as we have now stated it; but the substance of it is avowed by many, and will be found, we suspect, lurking as a secret principle of action in the hearts of many more. And, in reply to it, I might ask, what is

the nature or amount of the reparation which they suppose it possible for sinners to make to the divine law? or what is the precise weight which they would attach to the obedience of sinners, as determining the divine mind in extending mercy to them? Having reminded them of what the divine law requires—even that they shall love the Lord their God with all their heart—I might ask whether they can single out any one action of their lives, which, even as an insulated act, and as viewed apart from the general tenor of their conduct, they can in sober seriousness believe that law will approve of, and admit as having been performed with a single eye to the glory of God; and I might then ask farther, whether they can deliberately allege, that they are doing honour to the character of God as a righteous lawgiver, by supposing that he will remit the positive transgression of his law on one point, for the sake of an act of obedience that falls immeasurably short of its requirement in another? It would not be difficult indeed to show, that every such act is utterly destitute of what constitutes the very essence of obedience; and that calling it an act of obedience therefore at all, is to invest it with a character that does not belong to it. But we do not require to call in the aid of this consideration, in order to demonstrate the fallacy of such a scheme. Let the obedience of sinners be rated as high as they will themselves venture

to do, and let the weight which they attach to that obedience, in determining the question of their acceptance with God, be just as little as can be conceived; still if it be taken into the account at all, there is introduced into the divine procedure with sinners a principle of compromise—there is a letting down of the divine law to an accommodating level with what is called human infirmity—and after all this fluctuation in the principles, which guide the decisions of an unchangeable God, and after all the attempts at an adjustment, between the interests of a government of infinite rectitude, and the imperfections of the creatures who have rebelled against that government, there is still a mighty chasm that cannot be filled up; and mercy must, notwithstanding, come in to seal the reconciliation.

All this, and a great deal more to the same purpose might be urged, as it has frequently been; and then we might propose it as a question for the decision of every man of common understanding, whether a scheme like this, which recognises no fixed or determinate principle of procedure—where rigorous requirements are made, only to be relinquished by successive acts of indulgence—and penalties threatened that are never in reality to be exacted; or whether the scheme which represents God as setting aside every such method of accommodation—declaring that no plea of partial obedience is admissible into his

decisions respecting his treatment of sinners—and tendering them at once a free remission, on the ground of the perfect righteousness of a divine surety—invests the divine character with the higher attributes of rectitude, and holiness, and truth? But conclusive as I hold such a line of argument to be, I confess I would rather place it on a somewhat different ground. As a question for the decision of the understanding alone, it may be made the subject of a thousand cavils; and endless evasions may be contrived whereby to escape from the most obvious conclusion. But I would appeal to the tribunal of conscience; and I would put it to those who object to the doctrine of free grace, on the ground already stated, whether it is not true, that the method of reconciliation by faith in the blood of Christ alone, —a method which represents God as refusing to treat with sinners at all, on any other ground than the righteousness of the Redeemer—exhibits his character in a light in which they are afraid to contemplate it? whether they are not conscious that it invests him with a holiness, and a purity, and a rigour which they would willingly see modified and softened down? and whether they do not feel their hearts misgiving them, at the very moment that they would persuade themselves, that such a scheme of salvation is less in accordance with the principles of his righteous administration, than that on which they are rest-

ing their hopes? Unless in the case of those who have never made the question a subject of serious reflection at all, I do not hesitate to affirm that such will be the decision of conscience; and while that decision belies what they would make their understanding approve, what is their argument but a subterfuge whereby to make their escape from the humbling attitude, into which the doctrine of free grace would bring them? and what is the ground of the offensiveness which, in their eye, cleaves to this doctrine, but that it impresses upon them the character of utter unworthiness, and has not left some great thing for them to do whereby they might inherit eternal life?

I would now advert for a little to the other point of view, in which the gospel method of salvation may be considered—I mean with a reference to the way in which it is fitted to affect, or influence the character of sinners. And here the doctrine of a free remission has been objected to with still greater confidence, perhaps, than even on the other point; inasmuch as it has been alleged that its tendency, so far from being hostile to a life of ungodliness, is rather to encourage continuance in sin. In reply, then, to the charge, it might be shown, that from the very constitution of human nature, it cannot possibly be so; that the obedience of him who feels that he is indebted to the death of a compassionate

Redeemer, for the free remission of all his offences, must differ from that of the man who looks forward to pardon only as a contingency, so to speak, depending on some laborious doing of his own, just as the obedience of a child must differ from the constrained and heartless servitude of a slave; and that the former in reality is alone entitled to the name of obedience at all. In proof of this we might appeal to the character and conduct of every saint whose history has been recorded in Scripture; we might show that their holiest aspirations after a conformity to the divine image, and their most persevering endeavours after obedience to the divine law, were prompted by an overwhelming sense of the grace and mercy of God; and to all this evidence we might with assurance add the testimony of every believer living.

But here, as in the former case, I would prefer appealing to the consciences of the persons themselves who urge the objection; for I do feel assured, that if they would seriously entertain and honestly reply to the questions that might be proposed, they would be constrained to acknowledge, that so far from having any just ground of quarrel, with the doctrine referred to, because of its being calculated to encourage the sinner in sin, it is just because of its holy tendency that this doctrine is so offensive to them. Did I, in accordance with their own principles and views,

urge them to the cultivation of every virtuous sentiment, and the performance of every virtuous action—did I represent pardon, and acceptance, and eternal life, as either wholly or in part the reward of such a life—and did I remind them of the gratitude and love which they would ultimately owe to the bountiful bestower of such a reward; I doubt not they would readily acquiesce in the reasonableness of my admonitions at least, whatever they might do as to reducing them to practice. But were I to allege that all these blessings are at this instant freely tendered to them, for the sake of him who, with an infinite, a divine compassion, pitied and died for them—did I tell them that God is even now seeking to win them over to love and obey him, by blotting out, with one act of mercy, the accumulated transgressions of their past life—and could I find any adequate language wherein to express the gratitude with which such an act should be met on their part; they must be conscious that such a representation would be offensive and distasteful to them. And why, then, is it so? The professed aim of all that is virtuous and praiseworthy in their character is, even upon their own principles, to conciliate the favour, and secure the love of God; and they would hear us with patience, or even with approbation, did we tell them that they might confidently look forward to the attainment of their object. And why is it,

then, that they cannot bear to be told, that this love of God, which they are professedly seeking to secure, has more than anticipated all their expectations—that there is in it a height and a depth, and a length and a breadth, that they have never yet conceived of—and that, instead of waiting till they shall have completed a course of long and laborious servitude, it is ready at the moment to bestow upon them the inestimable privilege of being called the sons of God? The question is a very plain and a very simple one. Let them, therefore, fairly meet, and deliberately frame their answer to it; and let them then allege, if they can, that the doctrine of a free forgiveness is offensive to them, because of its unholy tendency. They know that the very reverse is the case; they are conscious that it demands from them a tribute of gratitude and obedience which they are not prepared to yield; and they feel, that if they did admit such a doctrine, they would pass upon every hour of their past lives a heavier sentence than they are well able to bear. The idea of doing some great thing, or submitting to some painful sacrifice, in order to secure the divine favour, goes directly to diminish the sense of obligation; while, by regarding the return of love and gratitude which they owe, as a service that is to be paid chiefly in a future world, they remove the demand that is made upon them to a convenient distance: and thus they can contrive to

pacify their conscience by just such a measure of obedience as they find it agreeable to yield. But, with the doctrine of a free remission through the blood of Christ, there is no getting rid of an instant and imperious demand upon their love and submission; there is nothing, in this case, to interfere and keep out of view the overwhelming obligation under which the love of God would lay them; and it is just to weaken or to conceal this sense of obligation, that they would willingly persuade themselves, that there remains some great thing for them to do, whereby they may inherit everlasting life.

It is possible that they to whom these remarks do more immediately apply will not be very ready to acquiesce in the truth of them. But there are many, nevertheless, who, I am persuaded, will recognise in them a representation that accords with their own experience. The same persons, too, will probably recollect, that their proneness to seek after some great thing to do, whereby to seal their reconciliation with God, long survived the hope of finding acceptance by the deeds of the law; and that, in consequence of their misapprehension respecting the freeness of Christ's salvation, and their slowness of heart to credit the generosity of the gospel, they were long shut out from the enjoyment of that peace, and everlasting consolation, and good hope through grace, which its glad tidings are both fitted and designed to

impart. But, whatever sinners may make of the gospel, it is still true that its great object is to give peace and joy in believing, and, by thus disarming the enmity of the carnal mind, to secure, on their part, a cheerful and affectionate obedience to the divine law; and whether, therefore, we would administer consolation, or whether we would inculcate holiness of life and conversation, we would proclaim a free remission through the blood of the cross, and preach Christ crucified, "the power of God, and the wisdom of God unto salvation."

SERMON XVII.

DANIEL'S PRAYER.

DANIEL IX. 3.

And I set my face unto the Lord God, to seek by prayer and supplications, with fasting, and sackcloth, and ashes.

THE particular occasion on which the prophet gave himself to the exercise of supplication and fasting, with so much solemnity and seriousness, is stated in the preceding context; and the special subject of his petition we find recorded in the following verses. "In the first year of Darius, the son of Ahasuerus, of the seed of the Medes, which was made king over the realm of the Chaldeans; in the first year of his reign, I Daniel understood by Books the number of the years, whereof the word of the Lord came to Jeremiah the prophet, that he would accomplish seventy years in the desolations of Jerusalem. And I set my face unto the Lord God, to seek by prayer and suppli-

cations, with fasting, and sackcloth, and ashes." He then goes on to record the confessions which he made, and the supplications which he poured out, on behalf of himself and his captive brethren; and at the 16th verse, we find him thus expressing the peculiar manifestation of the divine favour, which he was so urgent to obtain. "O Lord, according to all thy righteousness, I beseech thee, let thine anger and thy fury be turned away from thy city Jerusalem, thy holy mountain; because for our sins, and for the iniquities of our fathers, Jerusalem and thy people are become a reproach to all that are about us. Now, therefore, O our God, hear the prayer of thy servant, and his supplications, and cause thy face to shine upon thy sanctuary that is desolate, for the Lord's sake." It may serve, then, to place in a more striking light the full force of this very interesting prayer, and it may aid us in the practical application of the lesson which it inculcates, if we advert for a little to the personal history of the prophet, and the circumstances in which he stood at the moment referred to in the text.

At the commencement of this book, we are informed, that Daniel was of the children of Judah who were first carried away captive by Nebuchadnezzar, king of Babylon, as early as the fourth year of Jehoiakim, the king of Judah; an event which, though happening about eighteen years before the final overthrow of Jerusalem, and the

destruction of the temple, in the reign of Zedekiah, was in reality the beginning of the Babylonish captivity. On that occasion, the king of Babylon, we are told, gave commandment to his servant, "the master of his eunuchs, that he should bring certain of the children of Israel, and of the king's seed, and of the princes; children in whom was no blemish, but well-favoured, and skilful in all wisdom, and cunning in knowledge, and understanding science, and such as had ability in them to stand in the king's palace, and whom they might teach the learning and the tongue of the Chaldeans;" an event in which was literally fulfilled a prediction of judgment, addressed an hundred years before to Hezekiah, king of Judah, and recorded in the 39th chapter of the prophecies of Isaiah. In the execution of this command, the servant of Nebuchadnezzar selected Daniel, with three other young Jews, Hananiah, Mishael, and Azariah, afterwards known, and still, perhaps, better recollected, by the names of Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego, as persons corresponding to his sovereign's description, and brought them, with many more, it would appear, to Babylon, there to be trained for the service of the king; and it was at this early age, and in circumstances, too, of peculiar difficulty, as an humble unprotected captive, that Daniel manifested a strength of faith and confidence in God, which had seldom been surpassed by the most eminent

of his pious countrymen, and which might be regarded as a presage of the elevation which, by the good hand of God, he afterwards attained.

The time allotted for the education of persons in his circumstances, in order to qualify them for standing and ministering in the presence of the king, was three years; and during that period, "the king appointed them a daily provision of the king's meat, and of the wine which he drank, so nourishing them that, at the end of the three years, they might stand before the king." To a devout Jew such a provision must have been revolting, because it was unholy; inasmuch as it must frequently have been "the fat of idolatrous sacrifices, and the wine of drink offerings poured out to false gods;" and, in fact, it was one of the calamities of a state of captivity with which the children of Israel were threatened, in the event of their continued backslidings, that "they should eat defiled bread among the Gentiles, and unclean things in the land of Assyria." And such accordingly was the light in which the king of Babylon's provision was regarded by Daniel; for "he purposed in his heart," we are told, "that he should not defile himself with the portion of the king's meat, nor with the wine which he drank, and requested of the prince of the eunuchs, that he might not defile himself, but that to him and his three friends there might be given pulse to eat, and water to drink." Though with this

prince "God had brought Daniel into favour and tender love," yet the former objected to his proposal, on the ground that his own life would be in jeopardy, were it found that the latter and his fellows were less fair to look upon than others of their sort. But Daniel, confiding in the power and faithfulness of God, as a refuge to them that put their trust in him, and a very present help in the day of trouble, so far prevailed as to have a trial of ten days, whether, with the simple fare which they solicited, they would bear a comparison with those who partook of the king's provision. "Prove thy servants," said he "for ten days; and let them give us pulse to eat, and water to drink. Then let our countenance be looked upon before thee, and the countenance of the children that eat of the portion of the king's meat: and as thou seest, deal with thy servants." The trial was made, and God suffered not the confidence of his servants to be put to shame; for "at the end of ten days," says the sacred historian, "their countenances appeared fairer and fatter in flesh than all the children which did eat the portion of the king's meat."

Such is the first recorded example of that devotedness to the glory, and that unhesitating confidence in the power and faithfulness of God, by which Daniel stood forth, amidst the degeneracy and desolation of Judah, a living testimony to the supremacy of Jehovah, as the unchangeable and

covenant-keeping God; and the whole of his future life was one practical illustration of the truth, that "those who honour the Lord, he will honour;" inasmuch as of all men he was the individual who did most to sanctify the great name of the Lord of hosts among the heathen, and to extort from the votaries of idolatry an acknowledgment of the divine sovereignty. At the end of the period allotted for their education in the language and learning of the Chaldeans, Daniel and his friends were brought in to stand before the king; and "God," it is said, "gave them knowledge and skill in all learning and wisdom," so that, in "all matters of wisdom and understanding that the king inquired of them, he found them ten times better than all the magicians and astrologers that were in all his realm."

It was not, however, by his general superiority in human learning to the wise men of Babylon that Daniel was chiefly distinguished. In the very same year in which he was first brought in to stand before Nebuchadnezzar, he was enabled, by immediate communication from heaven, to satisfy the extraordinary demand of the king, when he required of his wise men, not only that they should interpret to him a dream wherewith his spirit had been troubled, but that they should bring back also to his recollection the dream itself, which he had forgotten. The demand was no doubt an extravagant one; but, in the provi-

dence of God, it was employed to place the prophetic character of his servant beyond all suspicion or dispute, by a sort of evidence which the king of Babylon himself recognised as most unequivocal, when, in reply to his wise men, who remonstrated with him on the unreasonableness of his demand, in requiring them to tell him what he had forgotten, he thus addressed them: "Ye have prepared lying and corrupt words to speak before me till the time be changed; but tell me what the dream is, and then I shall know that ye can show me the interpretation thereof." With this demand, then, Daniel was enabled to comply; and, in consequence of declaring and interpreting the dream, the king, we are told, after acknowledging the God of Daniel to be "a God of gods, and a Lord of kings, and a revealer of secrets," "made Daniel a great man, and gave him many great gifts, and made him ruler over the whole province of Babylon, and chief of the governors over all the wise men of Babylon."

It was thus that in little more than three years after he was carried into captivity, with no other prospect before him than that of spending the remainder of his life in a state of slavery, and while yet he must have been a very young man, Daniel was elevated to the distinguished place of the first subject in the first empire of the world; nor is there any reason to believe, that amidst all the changes that he witnessed, and all the plots

that were formed against him by his numerous and powerful rivals, his prosperity and honour suffered any abatement or reverse. It may appear, indeed, at first sight as if he must have been living in retirement and obscurity during the reign of Belshazzar, a descendant and successor of Nebuchadnezzar; inasmuch as when that impious and infatuated monarch was terrified by the handwriting that appeared to him on the wall, while he was rioting in guilty pleasure, and could find none among his wise men and soothsayers who could interpret to him the sentence of wrath, he did not seem to know that there was such a person in his kingdom as Daniel, till he was told or reminded of it by the queen. It is known, however, from the undoubted testimony of profane history, that while this licentious prince abandoned himself to every frivolous and guilty indulgence, the administration of the empire was really carried on by his mother—obviously the person who is called queen in the passage referred to, and a person moreover of singular wisdom and enterprise—and that she employed Daniel in the management of public affairs, as he had been employed by former kings, is abundantly evident, both from the fact that she suggested to the king his being sent for in that emergency when the wisdom of his wise men had failed him, and also from what Daniel himself has recorded, that in the third year of the reign

of Belshazzar, he was engaged in doing the king's business. Of the faithfulness of Daniel in explaining the fearful import of the miraculous handwriting, and of the almost instantaneous accomplishment of his prediction in the death of Belshazzar, and the capture of Babylon by the forces of Darius the Mede, led on by Cyrus his nephew, it is unnecessary to speak. It is more to our present purpose to remark, that even the transference of the kingdom of Babylon from the successors of Nebuchadnezzar to a new line of kings in the person of Darius, served rather to augment than to diminish the honour and reputation of Daniel; for though Darius, in a moment of pride and thoughtlessness, gave his assent to a decree which he could not reverse, whereby the prophet was doomed to be cast into the den of lions, yet the anguish which he experienced on finding that by his rash decree he had been betrayed into the furtherance of a most iniquitous and malignant plot against the prophet's life, and the joy which he manifested on discovering that the object of his solicitude had received no hurt, abundantly testify the value which he put upon Daniel's services, and the veneration which he entertained for his character. "The king went to his palace, and passed the night fasting, neither were instruments of music brought before him; and his sleep went from him. And he arose very early in the morn-

ing, and went in haste unto the den of lions. And he came and cried with a lamentable voice, O Daniel, servant of the living God, is thy God whom thou servest continually, able to deliver thee from the lions? And the king was exceeding glad for him, and commanded that they should take Daniel up out of the den. And the king wrote unto all people, nations, and languages, that dwell in all the earth; I make a decree, that in every dominion of my kingdom men tremble and fear before the God of Daniel; for he is the living God, and stedfast for ever, and his kingdom that which shall not be destroyed, and his dominion shall be even unto the end. And so," says the sacred historian, "this Daniel prospered in the reign of Darius, and in the reign of Cyrus the Persian."

Such is a short outline of the history of this eminent individual, from the time that he was carried captive into Babylon, till his elevation to the place which he filled at the period referred to in the text—even the first place of honour and trust in the empire of Persia: and I would now inquire how these circumstances may be brought to bear on the subject of his prayer, as recorded in the passage before us. "It was," as he has himself informed us, "in the first year of the reign of Darius, that he understood by books the number of the years, whereof the word of the Lord came to Jeremiah the prophet, that he

would accomplish seventy years in the desolations of Jerusalem." Acquainted, then, as Daniel was with the word of God as delivered by the prophets who had foretold the captivity and restoration of Judah, and confiding in the unchangeable faithfulness of that word, as his whole life testified that he did, the return of his countrymen to Jerusalem was an event on which he must have assuredly reckoned, not only as certain, but as very near; inasmuch as he could not but know, that the promise of that event as given by the prophet Jeremiah was absolute and unconditional—as much so as the promise formerly given to Abraham, respecting the deliverance of his posterity from the bondage of Egypt. "This whole land," said the Lord by the mouth of his prophet, "shall be a desolation, and an astonishment; and these nations shall serve the king of Babylon seventy years. And it shall come to pass when seventy years are accomplished, that I will punish the king of Babylon, and that nation, saith the Lord, for their iniquity, and the land of the Chaldeans, and will make it perpetual desolations."

Nor were there wanting other and very unequivocal intimations to give Daniel the assurance that this event was at hand. He had already witnessed the overthrow of the Babylonish empire in its subjugation by the Persians, whereby, from being a great and independent kingdom, it

sunk into the state of a conquered province; and in the manner in which that conquest was effected he had seen the literal fulfilment, even to the most minute circumstances, of a variety of predictions, delivered at different times, and by different prophets. He saw, too, in the conqueror of Babylon, the very person who had been referred to by name in the prophecies of Isaiah an hundred and seventy years before; "thus saith the Lord of Cyrus, he is my shepherd, and shall perform all my pleasure, even saying to Jerusalem, thou shalt be built; and to the temple, thy foundation shall be laid;" for though, at the time here referred to, Darius was nominally king, yet Cyrus was not only conjoined with him in the kingdom, but was in reality the individual who had achieved all the conquests, and therefore held the supreme command. Nor could the prophet fail to perceive, that from the advanced age of the former, the latter must very soon come to the undivided sovereignty—an event which did in fact take place within two years, and the very year too that terminated the predicted captivity of Judah. And finally, if any thing like human influence could be required to incline the heart of the king towards the liberation of the Jewish captives, and thereby to help on the fulfilment of prophecy, Daniel must have been conscious that he possessed that influence; for when we reflect, that from being himself originally a captive, he

had held the high and honourable place of prime counsellor of state, during a period of sixty-five years, not only under various kings of the same line, but under two successive dynasties—that his personal character had extorted from two of the mightiest potentates of the east, a public and solemn acknowledgment of the supremacy of the Lord of Hosts—and that he grew in honour and reputation as he advanced in years; can it be doubted that such a man would have a powerful influence in securing from a prince like Cyrus, the freedom of an oppressed and enslaved people, whose liberation was a matter of so deep and affectionate interest to him, and so much in unison, moreover, with the generosity and the general policy of the sovereign who could grant it?

If ever there was a future event, then, which might have been reckoned on with absolute certainty—and one, therefore, in the accomplishment of which it might appear that prayer could have no room or efficacy—it was just the restoration of the Jewish captives to the land and city of their fathers. And yet, so far from supposing that there was no place for prayer to occupy, among the various means that were employed to bring about that event, it was just his firm belief in the certainty and nearness of it, that set Daniel upon fervent and persevering supplications for its accomplishment. We cannot doubt, indeed, that it had always been a subject of prayer with him;

for the man who, in the face of a decree that was to consign him to the den of lions, "went into his house, and his windows being open in his chamber toward Jerusalem, kneeled upon his knees three times a day, and prayed, and gave thanks before his God," could never cease to implore the fulfilment of the promise, that his oppressed brethren should one day return to their country, and again sit each under his own vine, and under his own fig-tree, without any to make them afraid. But still it was, as he himself tells us, because he contemplated the near approach of this deliverance, that he gave himself to special prayer for the fulfilment of the promise; and we have only to read the prayer itself to be convinced, that had this fulfilment been suspended on the fervour and urgency of his supplications, he could not have put forth a mightier effort of desire. "O my God, incline thine ear, and hear; open thine eyes, and behold our desolations, and the city which is called by thy name: for we do not present our supplications before thee for our righteousness, but for thy great mercies. O Lord, hear; O Lord, forgive; O Lord, hearken and do; defer not, for thine own sake, O my God; for thy city and thy people are called by thy name."

Here then it may be asked, upon what principle it was that Daniel, with what might appear an absolute assurance of the approaching restora-

tion of his captive brethren, did nevertheless make that deliverance the subject of a prayer as earnest, and as persevering, as if his supplications alone had been to determine the event? and it is to the solution of this question, which I conceive his conduct has itself furnished, that I would especially direct your attention, as calculated to throw great light on the subject of prayer, both as to the nature of the thing itself, and the place which it occupies in the economy of grace. I am aware, indeed, that simply the example of such a character as Daniel, would be sufficient to determine the procedure of every devout mind in any thing like similar circumstances; and we cannot doubt that multitudes have derived from it encouragement to persevere with holy ardour, and unwearied constancy in supplication and prayer. But it is obvious at the same time, that this example must be still more interesting and effective, if we can discover the principles on which it proceeded; and these, I apprehend, it is not difficult to determine.

And, in the first place, with regard to the nature of the prayer itself, it is abundantly evident that it was just expressing or embodying in language the state of his mind as directed towards an object, in the accomplishment of which he felt a most intense interest. Affectionately concerned for the well-being of his countrymen, who were suffering all the debasement, and many of the

hardships of captivity, he longed to see them delivered from the yoke of oppression; and still more deeply concerned for the honour and glory of his God, whose great name had been profaned among the heathen, by the temporary desolation which by their apostacy and impenitence his people had brought upon themselves, he felt a corresponding earnestness of desire to see that honour vindicated, and that great name sanctified by a manifestation of the mighty power, and the unchangeable faithfulness of God, on behalf of Judah: and believing that both these ends would be obtained by the restoration of the Babylonish captives, as promised by the prophets, his whole soul was directed towards that event, with all the ardour of desire and of expectation which it was able to put forth. With these sentiments, indeed, both towards God and towards his brethren, it was impossible for him to cease exercising such a desire; and had his will been accompanied with a power that was adequate to effect what he willed, the object of that desire would assuredly have been accomplished. But while he was conscious that he was utterly destitute of any such power, he was persuaded that what he longed for was in accordance with the will of him who "speaks and it is done, who commandeth and all things stand fast;" and the only thing therefore that he could do, was just to let his feeble and inefficient will go out, and identify itself, so to

speak, with that sovereign will which must at every instant be accompanied with the agency of an almighty power—nay, which is itself the very exercise of omnipotence. But if this was all that he could do, it was something also which, with the sentiments that he entertained, he could not help doing; and thus, independently altogether of any warrant or permission formally and directly to address himself to God, the soul of Daniel must have been exercising the desire, and the hope, and the expectation, which, apart altogether from language, do in reality constitute the very essence and spirit of prayer.

Such then, I conceive, is the great fundamental principle of this holy exercise, as it is engaged in by every spiritual worshipper. The believer never can, without belying his principles, deliberately desire any thing that he knows to be contrary to the will, and inconsistent with the glory of God; and in every case in which he either wishes for, or supplicates what is in these respects doubtful, he must be anxious to do so conditionally—so qualifying his desire or his petition as that it may be given him, if agreeable to his Maker's will, or conducive to the manifestation of his Maker's glory. But, on the other hand, if he be true to his principles, he never can cease vehemently to desire what he does know to be accordant with the will, and subservient to the glory of God; and with respect to every such

object, if he possessed the power of willing its accomplishment, he would assuredly put forth the effort that was required. Feeling, however, that his will is utterly powerless, but knowing also that there is a will that can infallibly execute all its purposes, his desire necessarily assumes the form of supplication — it goes out in the same direction with that which he knows to be accompanied with an immediate and irresistible agency —and it gathers strength from the very persuasion, that it is put forth in unison with that supreme will. And thus it is, that there is laid in the very constitution of our nature, a foundation for the exercise of prayer, and that even if there had been no express permission, or invitation, or command to pray, a sanctified soul—a spirit on which the divine image has been impressed— must have cherished the sentiments and feelings which constitute the very strength and substance of supplication.

But I observe, secondly, with regard to the rank which Daniel's prayer occupied among the various means or agencies that were to be employed in bringing about the object of it, he had good reason to believe, that it was neither without a definite place, nor in itself devoid of efficacy. He was acquainted, as we have already seen, with the writings of Jeremiah—for it was from these writings he learned that the captivity of Judah was to continue for seventy years—and he

could not therefore but know, that when God promised to set "his eyes upon them for good, and to bring them again to the land of their fathers, he promised also that he would give them an heart to know him that he is the Lord, and that they should return unto him with their whole heart,"—or, as it is still more distinctly expressed by the same prophet in another passage, "Thus saith the Lord, that after seventy years be accomplished at Babylon I will visit you, and perform my good word towards you, in causing you to return to this place. Then shall ye call upon me, and ye shall go and pray unto me, and I will hearken unto you; and ye shall seek me, and find me, when ye shall search for me with all your heart." Daniel, then, was well aware, that the event for which he longed and prayed necessarily involved in it the spiritual amendment, as well as the temporal deliverance of Judah; he saw that the return of their heart to God was essential to their triumphant return to the land of their fathers; and he felt, therefore, that humiliation and confession of sin was not only a becoming exercise in him at such a moment, but, in reality, a fulfilment in part of the very promise in which he confided Daniel, it is true, was not one of those who were personally to enjoy the blessing of being restored to their country and their privileges; for though he lived to witness that happy event, he was never himself to see his native land, nor ever to

take sweet counsel with those who went up to the house of the Lord; and it is this very consideration that gives a peculiar charm to the earnestness, and holy importunity, with which he urged his plea for them at the throne of grace. But he acted, nevertheless, in the spirit of a genuine Israelite, when he acknowledged himself personally concerned in the penitence and contrition, with which it became his countrymen to look forward to the termination of their captivity; and, even independently of any personal concern that he had in the subject, he could not doubt that his confessions and prayers would be of avail for the benefit of others. Throughout the whole period of that protracted captivity, he had been honoured to vindicate the power, and assert the supremacy of the Lord God of Israel; by the wisdom of his counsels, and the weight of his personal character, he had paved the way for that decision, in favour of the people of God, to which the king of Persia was soon to be brought; and the whole business of his active and most laborious life was made to bear on the interests and the liberation of his afflicted brethren. And if God had thus assigned to the outward actions of his servant, an important place in carrying into effect his thoughts of peace towards his penitent people; is it conceivable, that he had no place in that scheme to assign to the holy and spiritual efforts of the same servant? or that the aspira-

tions of a sanctified spirit—the travailing of a soul intent upon the accomplishment of the divine will, and the manifestations of the divine glory, should be less efficient or less essential in the execution of the divine counsels, than the outward and ordinary agency of human actions? The whole tenor and the most explicit declarations of Scripture stand opposed to such a supposition; nor can I understand how a devout mind should have any difficulty in conceiving that it must be so. The agency of prayer is indeed a less obvious and palpable thing than that outward co-operation, whereby mankind are rendered subservient to the accomplishment of the divine purposes. But is it not an agency of an unspeakably loftier character? is it not the co-operation of an immortal spirit, bearing the impress of the divine image, and at the moment acting in unison with the divine will? is it not befitting the character of God to set upon that co-operation a special mark of his holy approbation, by assigning to it a more elevated place among the secondary causes which he is pleased to employ? and must there not be provision made, therefore, in the general principles of his administration, for fulfilling the special promise of his word, "the Lord is nigh to all that call upon him, to all that call upon him in truth?"

It is by some such view of prayer as we have now taken of it, that I would endeavour to re-

move the difficulties of those who may have been perplexed by subtile speculations on the place which it occupies, and the efficacy which belongs to it in the economy of grace; difficulties which, in reality, have nothing more to do with prayer than with any thing else connected with human agency. And if what has now been stated, respecting the nature of this exercise, and the place which has been assigned to it, be true; then how different a thing is it from that formal and heartless address to God, which passes, I fear, with too many for prayer; though it be more like the constrained payment of a stipulated homage, for which some benefit has been or is to be received, than the direction of the heart's desires into the same channel with the will of our heavenly father! And yet, does not every man who professedly prays, virtually acknowledge, that prayer is what we have now represented it to be? in naming the name of Christ, as that alone through which his supplications will be heard, does he not say, that he desires and asks nothing but what the Redeemer will sanction and approve? and as often, therefore, as he betakes himself to that exercise, is he not avowedly seeking to have his will resolved into the will of God? But if he deals honestly in making such a profession, and if he experiences, during his seasons of spiritual exercises, the peace and satisfaction of having his affections and desires brought into unison with the divine mind;

he must feel, that it is equally his interest to have them at all times so regulated; and that it is the happiness of his nature to be brought into that state, where the apostle's admonition, "pray without ceasing," would not only be to him a strong expression for the frequency with which he should engage in prayer, but a literal representation of the settled habit and disposition of the soul. And how unspeakably must the blessedness of such a state be enlarged, when we reflect, that it is not merely one of passive acquiescence in the divine will, but that every effort of holy desire, with a confiding reliance on the intercession of our great High Priest, is honoured to be instrumental in carrying that will into effect; that on every subject connected with our own spiritual well-being, and the interests of the church of Christ, we are not only permitted, but required to exercise this desire; and that the moment at which we are most deeply impressed with the feeling of our own helplessness, is just that in which a divine power is ready to effect the object for which we long! It was so in the case of Daniel; "for whiles I was speaking," says he, "and praying, and confessing my sin, and the sin of my people Israel, and presenting my supplication before the Lord my God, for the holy mountain of my God; yea, whiles I was speaking in prayer, the man Gabriel touched me and said, O Daniel, at the beginning of thy supplications the com-

mandment came forth, and I am come to show thee." And did believers, then, habitually bear in mind how much has been placed at their disposal by the privilege of prayer, O how highly would they estimate that privilege! how enlarged would be their expectations of what they might be the means of effecting for the glory of God, and the well-being of their fellow men! and what great things might be accomplished, did they more frequently unite, with one heart and one soul, to employ an agency which occupies so distinguished a place in the divine administration, and "set their face unto the Lord God, to seek by prayer and supplication!"

SERMON XVIII.

ANSWER TO DANIEL'S PRAYER.

DANIEL ix. 20—23.

And whiles I was speaking, and praying, and confessing my sin, and the sin of my people Israel, and presenting my supplication before the Lord my God, for the holy mountain of my God; yea, whiles I was speaking in prayer, even the man Gabriel, whom I had seen in the vision at the beginning, being caused to fly swiftly, touched me about the time of the evening oblation. And he informed me, and talked with me, and said, O Daniel, I am now come forth to give thee skill and understanding. At the beginning of thy supplications the commandment came forth, and I am come to show thee; for thou art greatly beloved.

WERE the question put to a believer, why he prays, or how he can hope that his prayers can have any efficacy in determining the will and the procedure of him, all whose purposes are unchangeable, and all whose works are known to him from the beginning; he might satisfy himself with replying, that God has authorized and commanded him to pray, with the express pro-

mise that the prayer of faith, offered up in the name of Christ shall be heard and answered; and that he can safely leave it therefore, with God himself, to provide for the fulfilment of his promise in perfect consistency with the immutability of his counsels. But though he may hold this to be a satisfactory answer to every such question, and on this ground decline entering on the discussion of any difficulty that may be suggested about reconciling the efficacy of prayer with the unchangeableness of the divine will; yet there is enough in Scripture to enable him to go much farther towards the solution of such difficulties, and what is unspeakably more important, to elevate his conceptions of the nature and privilege of prayer. He is there warranted to maintain, that prayer is most deeply concerned in the determination of all the purposes of God concerning his people; that every believing supplication that has been, or ever will be offered up, was as much the subject of the divine foreknowledge as any other action or event that was to take place in the moral world; and that the same infinite wisdom which so arranged the constitution of things as to provide for what we would call contingencies, and to determine the bearing and the effect of every one event upon another, did, by that same arrangement, make provision also for meeting every prayer of faith with a special and determinate act of his will.

In support of this doctrine, the believer may refer, among many other passages of Scripture, to the statement made in our text. The event for which Daniel had been praying, namely, the restoration of his captive brethren to their country and their privileges, had been the subject of many a prediction variously expressed, and of special promises frequently repeated; he had been himself personally employed as an agent, and a very efficient one too, in bringing about a combination of circumstances most favourable to the accomplishment of his wishes; he had just witnessed a variety of events which had been expressly foretold as the forerunners of the liberation of Judah, and which were so many distinct intimations, therefore, that God would neither forget, nor falsify his promise; and every circumstance conspired to give him the assurance, that the event which he longed for was infallibly secured. But though the state of things was such as apparently to place the hope of Daniel beyond the possibility of disappointment; and though he might seem to have nothing to do, but quietly to wait till the moment arrived when, according to the determinate counsel and foreknowledge of God, it was to be realized; yet he gave himself to prayer, obviously with the conviction that, in order to give efficiency to all the subordinate causes that were conspiring to bring about the deliverance of Judah, there was required an immediate determina-

tion of the divine mind—an act of the will of him "who speaks and it is done, who commandeth and all things stand fast;" and it is equally evident from our text, not only that this prayer of the prophet formed an essential part of the plan, by which God was graciously pleased to carry his purposes into execution, but that the place which it occupied in that plan was a very distinguished one—that it had to do only and immediately with the determination of the divine mind—and that there was suspended on it, so to speak, that act of the divine will that was to give efficiency to every other agency whereby the desired event was to be brought about. With respect, indeed, to the divine mind itself, there could be no contingency in the event which the prophet prayed for, and no suspense, therefore, about God's own determination regarding that event; inasmuch as the supplication of Daniel was as certain a thing in the divine foreknowledge, as the act of will whereby the object of that supplication was granted. But with respect to the prophet himself, the case was very different. Of the secret purposes of the divine mind he knew nothing; while he did know that God had expressly declared, with a reference to the very blessing which he supplicated, "then shall ye go and pray unto me, and I will hearken unto you;" and in as far, therefore, as concerned both his duty and his privilege, that gracious act of the divine will, which he knew was essential to

the deliverance of his countrymen, was made to turn upon his prayer, just as the other blessings, which God had made him instrumental in bestowing upon his brethren, had been suspended on the exercise of his personal influence with the king of Persia.

In reply, then, to all that may be objected to the efficacy of prayer, the believer need not hesitate to assert that it has something to do, and a great deal more, too, than he is capable of estimating, with the determinations of the divine mind; and it is this very consideration that must elevate his conceptions of it as his most precious and honourable privilege. In every external act of obedience which he may perform, and in every enterprise of Christian benevolence in which he may engage, whereby to promote what he knows to be accordant with the will of God, he has to do immediately with his fellow creatures; and if he does act in co-operation with the will of his Creator, it is indirectly, and through the medium of created things. But in the mental effort of prayer, he is brought, as it were, into immediate contact with the very mind of God; he is thereby admitted to co-operate with the divine will more directly than he can do in any other way; and if God, in his infinite condescension, has been pleased to ordain, that such an exercise shall occupy any place, or that such efforts shall be accompanied with any effect at all in the execution of his

purposes; the most distinguished privilege with which the believer can be invested is to be permitted to pray, inasmuch as it is giving him to have an immediate concern in the determination of the divine mind respecting the subject of his prayer; and it is impossible to conceive, therefore, how any higher honour could have been put upon the prophet, than to be told, as the text informs us that he was by the angel, "At the beginning of thy supplications the commandment came forth, and I am come to show thee."

Such is the light in which I conceive it is becoming the believer to contemplate the privilege of prayer, not merely as furnishing a reply to every insinuation that would go to depreciate its value, or call in question its necessity, but as serving to keep alive in his own mind a lively apprehension of the magnitude of that privilege. And assuredly, did we conceive of it as we ought to do—did we know what it is that constitutes the honour, and dignity, and blessedness of our nature, there is nothing in which we should consider ourselves more highly honoured or more richly privileged, than in being permitted and encouraged to pray; for what is there but littleness in every object of human ambition, what but vanity in the largest portion of worldly influence and power, compared with the honour "that cometh from God," when he admits us into his presence—gives us permission freely and impor-

tunately to supplicate what shall be for his glory and our own or another's good—teaches us to regard these supplications as having entered into the counsels of his wisdom, when he determined the procedure of his holy administration—and gives us to participate in the decisions of that sovereign will, which exercises a supreme control over all his creatures, and all their actions? But while the desire of standing in so near a relation to God, and of being permitted so to co-operate with his holy and blessed will, is indeed a noble and lofty ambition, it is essentially different in kind, as well as immeasurably superior in degree, to the aspirations of worldly minds after worldly honours and preferment. It is an ambition which springs from no feeling of self-complacency and esteem, and when gratified, it generates no pride—nay it is itself the dictate of humility and self-abasement; and the more largely it is satisfied, the more profound is the feeling of helplessness and destitution in which it originated. It is evident indeed from the very nature of the thing, that in as far as regards the believer himself, prayer is just the putting forth of a desire which he has no power to gratify; that the more ardent this desire becomes, the more conscious does he become of his utter incapacity to compass the object of his desire; and that in looking therefore to the divine will, and longing to have his own brought into accordance with it, on the

subject with which his soul is engrossed, he does most emphatically express his absolute dependance on God. Nor is it less evident, that when his prayer has been heard, and God has given him the desires of his heart, it must go directly to deepen a sense of dependance; that the very idea of his having received what he asked—and asked too, from a feeling of his inability to obtain it in any other way, necessarily excludes all ground of glorying or self-gratulation; and that as often therefore as he gives way to the sentiment, "by the strength of my hand have I done it, and by my wisdom, for I am prudent," he must at that instant have forgotten that prayer had any thing to do, in procuring the blessing which he enjoys.

Of the truth of these remarks, we have a very striking and instructive illustration in the passage before us. It had been said of Daniel, and is recorded by the prophet Ezekiel, when he was commanded to denounce the certainty of the divine judgments upon Judah and Jerusalem; "though Noah, Daniel, and Job, were in this land, as I live, saith the Lord God, they shall deliver neither son nor daughter; they shall but deliver their own souls by their righteousness;" a testimony the most explicit that could be borne, that of none was it ever more true than of Daniel, that "the effectual fervent prayer of a righteous man availeth much." Whether the prophet knew what had thus been recorded of

him, we cannot determine, though we hold it quite possible that he might. But he knew what was equivalent to it; for he had often in his happy experience been honoured with special answers to prayer, and on subjects too very remote from the ordinary course of God's providence. And yet, notwithstanding the honourable and distinguished place which had been assigned to him among the servants of God, never did a soul breathe its desires under a deeper sense of its own unworthiness, than when he "set his face unto the Lord God, to seek by prayer and supplications, with fasting, and sackcloth, and ashes," and when he "confessed his own sin, and the sin of his people Israel." "We have sinned, and have committed iniquity, and have done wickedly, and have rebelled, even by departing from thy precepts, and from thy judgments." "O Lord, to us belongeth confusion of face, because we have sinned against thee." And does not the experience of believers still bear witness to the same truth? Do they ever look with longing of spirit to the efficacy of Christ's blood, or welcome with gladness of heart the free invitations of his gospel, but at the moment that they feel as Daniel did, when he confessed his own sin and the sin of his people? Do they ever in right earnest supplicate the sanctifying influences of the Holy Spirit, but when feelingly alive to the pollution and debasement of sin, and

deeply sensible of the strength of inherent sinfulness? Do they ever implore, with any ardour or earnestness of desire, the light of the divine countenance, and the consolations of divine grace, but from a full conviction of the utter vanity of every experiment, and the feebleness of every effort of their own, to make themselves happy? And if ever they experience a sense of security on what concerns their present or their future well-being—if ever they feel an elevation of hope, that lifts them above the anxieties and cares by which they are at seasons depressed—or if ever they are conscious of being strengthened and fortified against the trials that may yet await them; is it not at the moment when, with a lively apprehension of their own nothingness, they can exercise a confiding reliance on the power and the promises of God? So true, so emphatic, and so full of meaning is the apostle's declaration, "most gladly therefore will I rather glory in my infirmities, that the power of Christ may rest upon me; for when I am weak, then am I strong."

Such is the honour which God vouchsafes to put upon his people, when he gives them permission to pray; and such is the tendency of that honour to generate a spirit of humility and dependance on the part of those who enjoy it. Whether, therefore, we view prayer as glorifying God, by recognising his supremacy, and resolv-

ing our will into his; or whether we regard it as bringing us into that state which is the most salutary for ourselves, we are not without abundant encouragement to avail ourselves of this distinguished privilege. Our text, however, furnishes other considerations calculated to excite us to frequent, and earnest, and persevering prayer. "At the beginning of thy supplications," said the angel to Daniel, "the commandment came forth, and I am come to show thee, for thou art greatly beloved." There was conveyed in this salutation a great deal of interesting information, regarding the deep interest which the higher intelligences feel in what concerns the state of the church on earth; and a very impressive illustration of what has already been stated respecting the honourable place which prayer occupies among the privileges of God's servants. Not only was it known to the angelic hosts, that the prophet was employed, as the text tells us that he was, confessing his own sin and the sin of his people Israel, and supplicating the fulfilment of God's gracious promises regarding the remnant of his heritage; but it was in connexion with that prayer—it was with a special reference to that supplication, that the purposes of God respecting the captives of Judah were revealed to the angels of heaven, and the decree or determination, of the divine mind concerning them was made to go forth.

But the point to which I would especially di-

rect your attention, is the fact here stated by the angel, that at the beginning of Daniel's supplications, the commandment went forth; a fact which exhibits in a very striking light the important place which the prayer of the prophet occupied, among the various means which God was pleased to employ, in effecting the deliverance of Judah. That the divine purposes on the subject of that prayer were unalterably determined, and that nothing on the part of Daniel could have effected any change in these purposes, is no doubt true. But we have no right to ask what the effect would have been had the prophet not set his face unto the Lord God, to seek by prayer and supplications; because his doing so was as much a part of the determinate counsel and foreknowledge of God, as the proclamation of the king of Persia itself; and we have no right therefore to say, that the event would have happened though Daniel had never prayed. In as far then as concerns the condescension of God, and the encouragement which he has given us to pray, our text virtually tells us that the blessing was in readiness—that it waited, so to speak, only to be applied for—and that its actual communication was suspended on the supplication of the prophet. Nor was this a privilege confined to particular individuals as Daniel, or to special times like those in which he lived. In as far as the special mission of the angel was concerned, it might indeed

be so; but it was not so with respect to the substance of the answer that was given to his prayer. In that glorious prediction of the purer and happier state of the church, that has been recorded in the sixty-fifth chapter of Isaiah—a state which yet remains to be realized, but which cannot possibly fail to be so—we find, among many other exceeding great and precious promises, the assurance of what took place in the case of Daniel, when at the beginning of his supplications the commandment went forth, "And it shall come to pass that before they call, I will answer; and while they are yet speaking, I will hear." The promise, in its most extended application, does no doubt refer to a particular period of the church—a period of greater prosperity than we have ever yet witnessed; for it is the time when "there shall be nothing to hurt or to destroy in all God's holy mountain." But why should it not be with believers now, as it shall be with them then? or what is there to prevent individuals experiencing to its full extent, the accomplishment of this promise? God is at present, what he will ever be, the hearer of prayer; it is the admonition of the apostle to believers generally, "be careful for nothing, but in every thing, by prayer and supplication, with thanksgiving, let your requests be made known unto God;" and our blessed Lord has left upon record the gracious assurance, "all things whatsoever ye shall ask in prayer, believing, ye

shall receive." The example in our text, therefore, as well as the promises recorded by the prophet Isaiah, is for the encouragement of believers in all ages; and they are there assured that God is ready not only to give them their hearts' desire, but to anticipate their wishes, and prevent them with the blessings of his goodness; that if they are straitened, it is in themselves, and not in him who has said, "open thy mouth wide, and I will fill it;" that there are in reserve for them blessings unspeakably richer than any that they have yet received, were their own spiritual longings more ardent and more enlarged; and that although for all these things he will be inquired after—though it is alike befitting his character, and essential to their well-being, that prayer and supplication should not be dispensed with; "yet before they call, he will answer; and while they are yet speaking, he will hear."

But there is still another consideration suggested by the text, which furnishes a very strong encouragement to prayer. It appears from the whole tenor of the preceding context, that the immediate object of the prophet's anxiety and concern was the redemption of his brethren from the bondage of Babylon; that he felt as if it were possible, that there might still attach to them so much of their former impenitency and forgetfulness of God, as would provoke him to protract the period of their captivity; and that it would

have been in the prophet's own estimation a full and satisfying answer to his prayer, had he simply received the assurance that God's "thoughts towards Judah were still thoughts of peace," that he was soon again "to rejoice over them to do them good," and that he "would assuredly plant them in their own land, with his whole heart and with his whole soul." But though this was evidently the immediate object for which Daniel prayed, and perhaps the amount of all that he hoped for; how exceedingly abundant above all that he asked or had conceived, was the communication which was made to him in answer to his prayer! Not only was he assured that "the warfare of Jerusalem was accomplished," that "the iniquity" which had brought her into captivity "was pardoned," and that "she was about to receive of the Lord's hand double for all her sins;" but there was communicated to him an account of what was afterwards to befal his people, when they should again be restored to their own land, and the precise period at which the whole Jewish economy should terminate, when the Messiah should appear to "confirm the covenant with many," and "cause the sacrifice and oblation to cease," by pouring out his own soul a sacrifice for sin. We cannot suppose, that when the prophet "set his face unto the Lord God, to seek by prayer and supplications," he anticipated the extent of the answer which was vouchsafed

to him; or conceived that there was awaiting him such a communication, as not only satisfied him on the subject of his immediate anxiety, but has furnished to believers of every subsequent age, one of the most explicit prophetic testimonies which God has given to the Messiahship of Christ.

Nor is this observation applicable to the case of Daniel alone. When the Lord appeared to Solomon in Gibeon, and said unto him, "ask what I shall give thee;" and when Solomon replied, "give thy servant an understanding heart to judge thy people, that I may discern between good and bad;" "God said unto him, because thou hast asked this thing, and hast not asked for thyself long life, neither hast asked riches for thyself, nor hast asked the life of thine enemies; but hast asked for thyself understanding to discern judgment; behold I have done according to thy words; lo! I have given thee a wise, and an understanding heart; so that there was none like thee, before thee; neither after thee, shall any arise like unto thee. And I have also given thee that which thou hast not asked, both riches and honour, so that there shall not be any among the kings like unto thee, all thy days." When there was given to the apostle Paul "a thorn in the flesh, a messenger of Satan to buffet him," and when "for this thing he besought the Lord thrice, that it might depart from him," the an-

swer which he received, though in one respect it fell short of his hopes and anticipations, did nevertheless, in reality, far exceed them; inasmuch as he saw reason to glory in the very infirmities which he once sought to have removed; because, through the sufficiency of divine grace, and the communication of divine strength, the power of Christ, by these infirmities, did more visibly rest upon him. And so will it be with believers generally. When they have set their heart and their affections on what they know to be accordant with the will of God as revealed in the Scriptures, and when, with a confiding dependance on the faithfulness of the Redeemer's promises, and the efficacy of the Redeemer's intercession, they make it the subject of earnest and believing prayer, the answer to such a prayer, in whatever form it may be conveyed, will bring with it an extent of blessing which they did not and could not anticipate; though they knew not well what they should pray for as they ought, yet the Spirit having helped their infirmities, he who knows the mind of the Spirit, will measure the return of blessing by his intercessions, and not by the feeble conceptions of his people; and they will find that it is no vain thing to pray, and no presumptuous thing to expect, that "God will do exceeding abundantly above all that they can ask or think."

If such, then, be the encouragements whereby

we are excited to prayer, how shall we think, without humiliation and shame, of the disinclination which we may frequently have felt towards engaging in that holy exercise, and of the formality with which we have too often observed it! and how little does our estimate of the privilege correspond with its real value, if we are satisfied with betaking ourselves to it at certain stated periods, in the way merely of a duty, even though at such seasons it should be gone about with some degree of solemnity and seriousness! That there should be stated periods for prayer, when the soul may withdraw itself more entirely from worldly things, and address itself more at length, and with greater intenseness of thought and feeling unto God, than it can do in ordinary circumstances, is agreeable to Scripture, and to the practice of the pious and devout of all ages; and though different individuals may adopt different plans in this respect, I mean as to the time and the regularity of the observance, yet the practice itself will be found indispensable to all. But if we really conceive of it as it has now been represented, it will be impossible for us to rest satisfied with such stated periods for prayer, however devoutly we may then engage in it. Till we are reconciled to God by the reception of the truth as it is in Jesus, we are chargeable, not only with individual acts of disobedience, but with being in a state of sin, inasmuch as the ha-

bitual forgetfulness of God is one continued act of rebellion against him. And if, therefore, we have been reconciled and brought near to him, must it not be our desire to live in a state of conscious nearness to him; that we may not only do individual things that are well-pleasing to God, but that we may habitually recognise, just as we formerly did habitually forget him? And if such be our desire, we shall not want innumerable opportunities of lifting up our souls to God, even when we cannot engage in the more lengthened exercises of devotion; for no man ever was, or ever can be so immersed in the business of life, as not to be able to breathe a petition for a father's blessing on every important step that he is about to take.

Nor will this habit of mind—this preparedness to pray—be cultivated from a mere sense of duty alone, by those who have learned to rank it among their privileges. Prayer is in truth the protection, the safeguard of the Christian, not only as preventing the inroads that might be made on his spiritual comfort, but as quickening the sensibility of conscience, and thereby providing a faithful monitor to him, should he venture on forbidden ground. There is no man who has ever attempted seriously to ask of God the pardon of his sins, and the sanctifying influence of the Holy Spirit, but must know experimentally, that he could not, after such an at-

tempt, proceed, with an easy conscience, deliberately to do what he knew to be inconsistent with the divine law; and it will be found, that multitudes have abandoned even the very form of prayer, because it laid an intolerable restraint on them, in the pursuit of some favourite enjoyment. And how much more powerfully, therefore, must it operate on the believer, who is so frequently engaged in offering up his desires to God, that at whatever moment temptation may present itself, he is instantly reminded that he is just come from the throne of grace, the immediate presence of his Maker! and how should this consideration excite every one to cherish habitually the spirit of prayer! Nor is it in cases only in which we are tempted to what we know and believe to be sinful, that prayer may come in to our aid. Did we make conscience of seeking the divine direction in every plan that we form, and of supplicating the divine blessing on every undertaking that we enter upon, we should find in that exercise the decision of many a question, in which inclination and conscience are found to take opposite sides; and where, without having recourse to prayer, the former will in all probability prevail. It has been said, with great energy, and, I am persuaded, with great truth, that, with respect to any line of conduct, "which conscience has pronounced to be wrong, but in which our inclination has after-

wards so warped our judgment as to persuade us that it is right, if we attempt to ask the blessing of God upon it in our closet, we shall often find our attempts to be vain—that our mouths will be stopped—and our efforts to pray annihilated; and, in like manner, that though some have had the hardihood professedly to defend practices which are expressly denounced by the law of God, and which go directly to ruin the peace and well-being of their fellow-creatures, yet none had ever daring enough to supplicate the divine blessing on such an ungodly enterprise—that an attempt like this would choke the utterance even of a profligate." Did we in every case, then, fairly and honestly lay before God the purposes that we have formed, and give ourselves seriously to ask his blessing on the execution of them; O how speedily would it demolish the plausible sophistry which had perverted our understanding, and by which we had permitted ourselves to be led to the very confines of presumptuous sin! and how would every such discovery enhance in our own estimation the value of prayer —the privilege of coming to the throne of grace— "that we may find mercy to pardon, and grace to help us in the time of need!"

SERMON XIX.

GOD KNOWETH THE HEART.

PSALM CXXXIX. 2.

Thou understandest my thought afar off.

THERE is perhaps no idea with which we are more familiar, at least in as far as the expression of it in words is concerned, than the omniscience of God, or that attribute of the divine nature, whereby he is at all times intimately acquainted with every thing regarding the internal condition and the outward circumstances of his creatures. Considered as a mere matter of opinion, it is one of the earliest notions that we acquire respecting the character of God; for though we are accustomed, from infancy, to hear heaven spoken of as the place of his habitation, where he makes a manifestation of his presence and of his glory, in a way that we cannot conceive of; yet we are given to understand that he is everywhere

present; it is from being told that he sees every action of every individual of his creatures, that we acquire one of our first and most distinct conceptions of his superiority to man; and one of the earliest restraints, perhaps, which we are conscious of having felt, and by which our parents or our teachers endeavoured to check the waywardness of our disposition, was just the assurance that God is intimately acquainted even with our very thoughts. The same idea, too, must, in after-life, have been presented to us more frequently than it is possible for us to reckon up. We can hardly have entertained one serious thought about God at all, without at the same moment feeling conscious, that every thing in our character and condition was under his immediate inspection; every time that we approach his footstool to implore his forgiveness, or supplicate his blessing, we professedly recognise his perfect knowledge of all our wants, and his intimate acquaintance with our most secret sins; and in all the prayers which we are wont to hear others offer up, we hear him addressed as that omniscient being, who "searches the heart, and tries the reins of the children of men."

There is probably no one truth, then, with which we have been longer acquainted, or of which we have been more frequently reminded, than that in our text; and assuredly there is no truth better fitted to exercise a constant and powerful

influence over the whole current of our thoughts, as well as the general tenor of our actions. Did we habitually realize the presence of God, not only as the attentive witness of our external conduct, but as every instant in immediate contact with every movement of the inner man; did we bear in mind that every such movement, which is not in accordance with his will, must be offensive and displeasing to him; and did we reflect, that the thoughts, and desires, and feelings, which are not subordinated to that will, are, in reality, so many acts of direct resistance to the divine mind; what solemnity and seriousness would not such reflections give to our character and deportment? with what diligence and anxiety should we not be watching over all our mental operations? and with what frequency and earnestness should we not be imploring the Divine Spirit, to take the government and direction of all the feelings and affections of the heart? But is this, or any thing like this, the effect produced by the truth in our text, on the minds of all who professedly believe it? On the contrary, is it not abundantly evident, from the most superficial view of the state of the world at large, that, with a vast proportion of mankind, that truth has no practical influence whatever? is it not too obvious, that so far from being habitually realized, there are multitudes who could not bear to entertain it as a reality for a single instant? is it

not an undeniable fact, that the peace and comfort of not a few actually depend on their being able to shut out the recollection of God's omniscience altogether? and what, then, can be said respecting this attribute of the divine nature, but that it is universally acknowledged in words, while by a great majority it is in reality denied? However frequently, therefore, we may have been conversant with the truth stated in our text, as a matter of opinion, we may stand in great need of being reminded of it, as a consideration that ought habitually to influence us; if it is not distinctly recognised, and in some measure felt, we can have no right apprehension of the extent to which we have carried our opposition and resistance to the will of God, and, consequently, no just sense of the patient endurance with which that resistance has been met on his part; and whether, therefore, we would convict the thoughtless and the unawakened, or whether we would remind believers of the distance at which they still stand from a state of perfect conformity to the divine image, there is perhaps no truth to which we can more seasonably direct their attention, than to the solemn declaration of the Psalmist, "thou understandest my thought afar off."

In illustration, then, of the remark already made, that the omniscience of God, as implying his intimate acquaintance with the true character and condition of all his creatures, is often virtu-

ally denied, we have only to refer to the indisputable fact, that multitudes can think and do in secret, without one feeling of regret or remorse, what they would be afraid and ashamed to avow in the face of the world. That such is the fact, none, I believe, will venture to deny; and it will also be acknowledged, that it holds true, not only with regard to such sentiments and actions as would merely subject them to the imputation of weakness, but to such also as carry with them a charge of moral delinquency. With this acknowledgment, however, it will probably be alleged, that it is nothing more than what might be expected; that we are so constituted as to be feelingly alive to the approbation and disapprobation of those around us; and that, being so constituted, it is not wonderful if mankind be deeply affected by the exposure in the sight of their fellow-men, of thoughts and actions which, if concealed, would cost them little or no uneasiness. Now, if by this it is merely intended to say that such is the fact, and that it is more or less true of all, that they can think or do, without self-condemnation, what they are conscious would, if known, justly expose them to the condemnation of the virtuous part of the community around them; the statement may perhaps be admitted as not very wide of the truth. But if it be meant by it to assert, that because it is so, there is therefore nothing wrong in it, or that there is no rea-

sonable ground to expect that it should be otherwise, then it becomes nothing less than an avowal of infidelity in its most revolting shape; for what is such a justification but to say, either that God does not know the secret thoughts and actions of his creatures, or that he is less rigorous in deciding upon the character and complexion of these thoughts than mankind themselves are, or that, if he does decide upon them, it is a decision on which he never intends to act?

To one or other of these conclusions every man must be considered as having brought himself, who is deliberately seeking any portion of his happiness in the formation or execution of schemes, the avowal of which would cover him with confusion in the presence of a fellow-creature of known and acknowledged virtue. The very care which such persons take to conceal their ungodly practices, is in reality a solemn denial of the truth stated in our text, inasmuch as it is virtually saying, that if they can only succeed in hiding their practices from the world, there is no other consideration to disturb or to restrain them. They acknowledge, by this very secrecy, that the presence of one human being, virtuous enough to disapprove of their character and conduct, would be sufficient to deter them from many things which otherwise cost them no uneasiness or regret; and they cannot, therefore, in sober seriousness believe, that they are at every instant under

the immediate inspection of a being of infinite moral purity—a being who is intimately acquainted with every feeling and affection of their nature—who determines with infallible certainty the amount of moral evil which attaches to every thought that has passed through their minds, and whose judgment respecting their character is not a mere matter of opinion, like that of their fellow-creatures, which does not necessarily affect their well-being, but a righteous decision, that fixes their eternal state, and from which there is no appeal. And yet if they believe in the existence of God at all, it is hardly possible for them, educated as they have been, in a community professedly Christian, to exclude from the conception which they have formed of his nature, the idea of his omnipresence ; nor is it easy to conceive how they can recognise this attribute of the Godhead, without being awed, at least, if not alarmed by the solemn reflection, that the most secret and successful scheme which they have ever formed, in the pursuit of unholy pleasure, or the acquisition of unsanctified gain, was conceived with the perfect knowledge, and executed in the immediate presence of him who is of purer eyes than to behold iniquity. There is only one explanation, therefore, that it seems possible to give of their conduct, and, however lamentable it may be, we fear it is the true one. It is, that they are actually living in a state approaching indefinitely

near to absolute atheism; for though they may not have the hardihood to avow it even to themselves as a matter of opinion, that there is no God, yet unless they had succeeded in shutting him altogether out of their thoughts, or had brought themselves so to conceive of his character as virtually to deny his essential attributes, it is impossible that they could, without fear or misgiving, cherish sentiments which they durst not utter in the presence of an individual more virtuous than themselves: and it cannot, therefore, be doubted, that, in their case at least, there is no distinct apprehension of the truth in our text, that "God understandeth their thought afar off."

The conclusion to which we have thus come appears so very obvious, that I cannot conceive how any one can possibly deny or evade it; and could they, to whom the remarks apply, be brought to give the subject their serious attention, they could hardly fail, I think, to perceive, that they have either been practically denying the existence of God altogether, or conceiving of his character as if sin were less offensive in his sight, than it is to multitudes of their fellowmen. It is thus that because God, in his infinite mercy and forbearance, does not meet every act of rebellion on the part of sinners with a distinct and unequivocal intimation of his holy displeasure, they forget that he sees, or flatter them-

selves that he does not regard them; it is "because sentence against an evil work is not speedily executed, that the hearts of the children of men are fully set in them to do evil;" and it is thus that multitudes may still be addressed as the Psalmist was commanded to address the ungodly of his time, "these things hast thou done, and I kept silence; thou thoughtest that I was altogether such an one as thyself." But I fear that the truth in our text is overlooked or forgotten, and therefore practically disbelieved, even by many who are not chargeable with deliberately seeking happiness in what they know would expose them to the condemnation of the more virtuous of their fellow-men, and what therefore they would not publicly avow. The remarks already submitted are, I suspect, true of multitudes who both claim and receive the respect of the world, as a tribute that is due to the excellence of their character, and of whom there is no reason to suspect, that their secret sentiments and conduct are materially different from what they openly appear and avow themselves to be; for it will not, I think, be denied, that there are many who, on the strength of their virtuous and upright character, not only consider themselves entitled to the esteem and good opinion of others, and would feel that injustice was done them, were these withheld; but who would deem it little short of an insult were it insinuated, that there is any

thing in the state of their heart and affections, on the ground of which they could be considered as forfeiting the place which they occupy in the opinion of the world. I would ask such persons, then, whether they could, without a deep sense of humiliation and self-abasement, bear to have the whole current of their thoughts and feelings, daily and hourly passing under the eye of those with whom they associate? whether they would not shrink from such an inspection, as a trial that would assuredly cover them with confusion? whether they are not aware, that the most praiseworthy of their actions would appear to be the result of motives and feelings little accordant with the external character which these actions bear? and whether the consciousness, that even one individual more virtuous and holy than themselves, is intimately acquainted with all the diversified sentiments of a sinful nature, which are successively awakened in their minds, would not humble and mortify them beyond what they dare to contemplate, or can bear to conceive of? It will be replied, perhaps, that such a supposition is one that can never be realized; and that such a rigorous examination is what no human being is prepared to undergo, without being overwhelmed by the discoveries which it would make. Be it so. But can they require to be reminded, or can they question the truth when they are reminded of it, that in point of fact they are every

day and hour actually subjected to a scrutiny unspeakably more rigorous? that they are every instant under the immediate inspection of him, who detects every latent principle of evil that has for a single moment lurked in their heart? that innumerable thoughts and feelings offensive to him, but scarcely recognised and very soon forgotten by themselves, are ever in the light of his countenance? and that in the estimate which he forms of the character of these thoughts, there attaches to them unspeakably more of moral delinquency, than the most virtuous of their fellowmen would ever ascribe to them? Can they fail then to perceive that their external actions, even when viewed in connexion with that general sense of moral obligation which dictates them, may go but a little way towards determining their character in the sight of God? that the judgment which he passes upon them refers to the thoughts, and desires, and feelings of the inner man? and that although the outward conduct may, and frequently must be a partial manifestation of these, yet by far the largest portion of what constitutes character in the sight of God, consists of that endless variety of mental operations which are known only to him who "searcheth the heart and trieth the reins of the children of men?" And how comes it then, that the consciousness of being perfectly known to a being of unspotted holiness, even to him whose

judgment respecting them is infinitely more momentous than the opinion of every created intelligence in the universe, awakens little or nothing of that humiliation and shame which they know would overwhelm them, were the thoughts even of a single day fully laid open to the inspection of a fellow-creature? How is it that they can enjoy with self-complacency, the credit and the reputation of a character which does not belong to them in the sight of him who knows what they really are? In what way can they formally engage in exercises, where they professedly recognise the divine presence, while a sense of that presence has never awakened any thing of the self-abasement which they would feel in confessing to a fellow-creature, the ten thousandth part of what they in words confess to him? And how can they contemplate the reckoning which they must hereafter abide, while they have no lively apprehension of the infinite efficacy of the blood which has been shed for the remission of sins? Such insensibility, if it be found to exist, can only be accounted for in the way that has already been stated. They have no serious and settled conviction upon their minds, of the truth in our text, "that God understandeth their thought afar off."

In the truth of these remarks, the Christian, I apprehend, will not hesitate to acquiesce. To the men of the world there is something very

unintelligible in the humbling acknowledgments which the devout believer is often heard to make, respecting the depravity and the deceitfulness of his heart; and these acknowledgments have accordingly been made the frequent subject of their merriment and ridicule. But could they be brought seriously to entertain the solemn declaration here made by the Psalmist—could they be made to conceive at all aright of the character of God, and to realize the simple truth that he observes and passes a righteous judgment on every feeling and emotion of their heart; one moment's distinct recognition of the divine presence would solve the difficulty, and silence the ridicule: and did they know what it is to long after an entire conformity to the divine will, they would find that the ground of complaints which they are disposed to regard as extravagant, or represent as insincere, is indeed a sad and painful reality. Even to those who have been persuaded to flee for refuge to the hope set before them in the gospel, and have actually experienced, in some measure, the rest which that hope holds out to the weary and heavy laden, the truth before us, as often as it is seriously contemplated, must be felt as a very solemn and impressive one; nor can it ever fail to awaken a humbling sense of their own character when they reflect, that they are every instant seen as they really are in all their weakness, impurity, and imperfection, by him

before whose opinion, the unanimous opinion of the whole human race must be absolutely annihilated.

I do not mean by this remark to assert, that in every case, and at every instant, believers recognise the presence of God as an unspeakably more important consideration than the opinion of the world; for one of the most painful and humbling considerations that will never fail to present itself in the season of self-examination, and on the review of their past lives, is just their proneness to forget the truth in the text, and their tendency to attach to the judgment of their fellow-men the weight and the importance which belong only to the judgment of God. But, instead of alleging any thing in justification or defence of this, it will, as often as they think of it, be the subject of their astonishment and humiliation that it should be so; and in proof of the remarks that have already been made respecting the practical unbelief that prevails on the subject of God's omnipresence, I would just appeal to the experience of Christians—those who are actually labouring to bear it in mind, but who will not hesitate at the same time to acknowledge how prone they are to forget it. They will acknowledge this proneness, not only when placed in circumstances that are calculated to awaken the fear of the world's reproach, or the love of the world's approbation, and where they are con-

scious, that the one or other of these considerations has too frequently exercised over them that influence which was due only to a solemn recognition of their being under the immediate inspection of God; but even at those seasons also, when they knew that no other eye either was or could be upon them, and when they professedly set themselves to pour out their hearts before him. They will recollect that on such occasions it has sometimes cost them a painful struggle to confess to him the whole truth; that even in that solemn moment when they were holding immediate converse with him, their pride would revolt at making the acknowledgments by which conscience was labouring to throw off its heavy load; that they could hardly bear to clothe in distinct and explicit language what they were at the same time conscious could not be denied; and that they have caught themselves attempting to modify, or soften down the charge which their own hearts preferred against them, just as if by removing their thoughts to a distance from themselves, they could withdraw them also from the immediate inspection of God. I trust that there are few Christians who have not been enabled to triumph in such conflicts with unsubdued pride—few who have not been frequently brought to make a full and undisguised confession of all the bitter things that conscience has written against them, and few who have not experienced the

luxury of having done so—feeling that amidst the entire prostration of every self-complacent thought, and the deepest sense of humiliation and shame, they had poured out their souls, in an unreserved acknowledgment of their offences, before a compassionate Father, who was ready to forgive and to forget them all. But still I am persuaded that there are many such who will readily admit all that has now been stated—many who will acknowledge that the conflict has often been a painful one. And what does such an acknowledgment amount to but a melancholy proof how prone we are to forget, and practically to deny, that "God understandeth the thoughts afar off?"

The reflections now suggested can hardly fail frequently to occur to the Christian, on contemplating the truth stated in our text; and as often as they do occur, they can as little fail to humble him under a sense of the light in which he must appear to him, "who is of purer eyes than to behold iniquity." But the truth before us is to believers as rich in consolation, as it is profitable for correction and reproof. It reminds them that he who is perfectly acquainted with the extent of the disease under which they labour, knows also the extent of the remedy that is necessary to be applied; and that if nothing can escape his notice respecting the disorder which sin has wrought in their moral nature, so he is infinitely wise to direct the operations of that mighty influence whereby this disorder is to be rectified.

Whatever may be the contrition and self-abasement which the recognition of his presence may awaken, they have, in the Redeemer's righteousness, a refuge from the dread and despondency, in which such a solemn reflection might otherwise involve them; and however obstinate they may feel their spiritual malady to be, his power is adequate to remove it. The text assures them that God understandeth their thought even afar off; that the very first movement of their heart towards a return to himself, was observed by him long before it became palpable to others, or was even distinctly perceived by themselves; and that the secret operation of his gracious influence sustained and strengthened the principle of a divine life within them, while as yet its very existence might appear to be doubtful. It intimates to them, that the faintest impression which his spirit makes upon them cannot escape his notice, nor the feeblest aspiration after spiritual blessings pass unknown or disregarded; and that before they have clothed their longings of spirit in explicit language, or even formed a distinct conception of what it is that they long for, he perceives the half-formed desire, and is prepared to satisfy it to the full.

While it is true, therefore, that God sees every sinful affection of the heart, and traces from its first appearance the progress of every sinful thought—whether it passes away and is forgot-

ten, or whether it continues to gather strength till it is embodied and made visible by some palpable act of ungodliness—and while this solemn consideration cannot fail to keep believers shut up to the faith of the gospel, and prompt them every day to make a new application to that blood which cleanses from all sin; it must encourage and console them to reflect, that the same all-seeing eye is watching over the progress of every gracious feeling and holy desire; and that his unseen but almighty agency is ready to minister strength to these feelings, against the deadening influence of inherent sinfulness from within, and of abounding iniquity from without. They might be ready to despond as to the issue of the conflict which they maintain, when they recollect the strength of those unholy principles with which they contend; and when they reflect, that after all that they have perceived of that strength, they have still formed but such an inadequate estimate of it, that they may be said to be contending with an unseen enemy. It might serve too to depress and to discourage them when they bear in mind, how much they are at the mercy of external circumstances—how frequently, in their intercourse with the world, the current of their thoughts takes a direction from the thoughts and the actions of others—and how far they have been thus carried away in the pursuit of lying vanities, almost before they were con-

scious of the ascendency which had been gained over their minds by what is frivolous or sinful, and before they could exercise any salutary control over the train of their mental operations. But their hopes will revive when they remember, that "God understandeth their thought afar off;" that he fully estimates the strength of every unsanctified principle, and not only knows, but is ready to impart the power by which it is to be resisted; that he foresees every combination of circumstances in which they can be placed, and determines with infallible certainty what effect these circumstances are to produce; that he perceives every suggestion which is presented to their minds, and anticipates the train of thought which that suggestion is to awaken; and that at every instant the whole future course of the mind's unceasing and diversified operations, is under the absolute control, and subject to the determination of the holy and righteous will of God. Did believers, then, labour to bear this truth habitually in mind—were they as forward to seek as God is to bestow the influences of his Holy Spirit—were they striving to keep alive the salutary impressions which he has already made, and is daily making upon them, through the various means of grace—were they continually committing their way unto the Lord, and seeking to put the train of their thoughts and feelings under the control and direction of his

blessed Spirit; might they not confidently reckon on making their escape from many a snare in which they are so frequently entangled? would they not become more and more inaccessible every day to those suggestions, that are perpetually diverting their thoughts from the subject that should occupy the first place in their heart? would they not soon become proof against many an assault that is now made on their spiritual comfort, and by which it is too frequently disturbed? and would they not find the most animating encouragement, as well as inexhaustible consolation, in the truth of our text, that "God understandeth their thought afar off?"

SERMON XX.

INIQUITY IN THE HEART A HINDERANCE TO PRAYER.

PSALM lxvi. 18.

If I regard iniquity in my heart, the Lord will not hear me.

THE declaration of the Psalmist must commend itself, I think, to the conscience of every man who reflects for one moment on the nature of prayer, or on the medium through which prayer is heard and answered. As often as we engage in that exercise, we professedly offer up our desires unto God for things agreeable to his will; for though we are encouraged to hope and believe, that he will "give us the desires of our heart," yet he does so, not by subjecting his will to any change in order to meet and satisfy ours—a supposition which is in itself impossible, and which would be as unbefitting his character as it would be ruinous to the well-being of his creatures—but by bringing our will into a conformity to what he

has revealed as his, and conferring upon us what was always ready to be communicated on his part, but the actual communication of which he has, with infinite condescension, been pleased to suspend, on its being desired and supplicated on ours. When we pray, therefore, we virtually acknowledge, not only that it is God's inalienable prerogative that his will should be supreme, but that it is the perfection and permanency also of our blessedness that his will be executed: we declare it to be our sincere and honest desire, that whatever he sees in our heart or life to be contrary to his mind, he would be graciously pleased to rectify or remove it: and as often as we offer up our supplications for any special object, we professedly do so with the special condition, that the thing prayed for be agreeable to his will; and that if we discover it to be contrary to that will, we shall unreservedly acquiesce in its being withheld.

All this, I conceive, must obviously be implied in the very act of putting ourselves into the attitude of prayer—if it be admitted that prayer is the offering up of our desires to God for things agreeable to his will; and if, therefore, we professedly do so, while, at the same time, our heart and affections are in reality given to the world; if we acknowledge in words that his will is in all things holy, and right, and good, while the habitual bent of our inclinations and desires is towards objects which he disapproves

and condemns; and if we express before him our thankful acknowledgment of the honour and privilege of being permitted to pray—the privilege of making known to him all our wants, and the honour of being concerned in the determination of his holy and blessed will—while, in point of fact, we engage in that exercise merely from some confused notion that it is a necessary duty; then it is very evident, that we are in his sight chargeable with the most revolting hypocrisy, and that it would only be an unspeakable aggravation of our guilt, to expect that such a prayer will be heard. Nor is it only in what to some may appear an extreme case like this, where the heart is wholly averse to spiritual things, that we may be chargeable with such hypocrisy. However willingly we may betake ourselves to prayer on any given emergency; however earnestly we may pour out our supplications before God; and however conformable to his will may be the thing which we pray for, considered in itself; yet if there be in our hearts a fixed attachment to some gratification or pursuit which we know to be sinful—if there be lurking in our minds a secret determination to adhere to that indulgence, knowing it to be the object of God's holy disapprobation—and if we are conscious that on this point we cannot, and we dare not say that we would willingly be conformed to his will; then there is in this one mental reservation enough to nullify the sincerity of all

our other professions: our prayers, when fairly interpreted, are nothing less than an impious proposal of a compromise between his blessed will and our sinful inclinations: and to every man, therefore, who has formed one right conception of the divine character as it is revealed in Scripture, it must be very evident, that "if we thus regard iniquity in our heart, the Lord will not hear us."

But the truth of the Psalmist's declaration will be equally manifest, if we reflect for a moment on the medium through which prayer is offered up and answered. Our Lord has said and put on record concerning himself, "I am the way, and the truth, and the life: no man cometh unto the Father but by me:" he encouraged his disciples to pray by the gracious assurance, "verily I say unto you, whatsoever ye shall ask the Father in my name, he will give it you:" and an inspired apostle has said concerning him, that "he is able to save them to the uttermost that come unto God by him, seeing he ever liveth to make intercession for them." Christ, then, is the only medium of access by which we can draw near to the Father—the only sacrifice by whose blood we can have boldness to enter into the holiest—the only high priest through whose intercession our prayers can find acceptance with God; and all this we professedly acknowledge, as often as, at the close of our prayers, we solemnly disown all pretensions to be heard in our own name, and

express our desire and hope, that they may be accepted and answered in the name, and through the merits of the Lord Jesus Christ. But if Christ has thus, in his mediatorial character, been "exalted at the right hand of God to be a Prince and a Saviour," it is because he first "humbled himself and became obedient unto the death," that being "made sin for us though he knew no sin, we might be made the righteousness of God in him;" and when in prayer, therefore, we acknowledge him as our great High Priest and advocate with the Father, we do at the same time profess our faith in the whole of the divine testimony concerning him—our entire acquiescence in the proposals that have been made to us for his sake—and our cordial acceptance of pardon, and reconciliation, and eternal life through his blood. But if, with this profession on our lips, our heart is all the while going after its covetousness; if we acknowledge in words our obligations to the Redeemer, while we are willingly surrendering ourselves to the dominion of the very influence from which he died to deliver us; and if we plead his death as the ground on which our supplications are to be heard, while we are indulging in any one point, and are secretly resolved to retain, the very evil which rendered that death necessary; is it not evident, that in addition to all the hypocrisy to which we have already referred, we are chargeable in the sight

of God with profaning the name of his holy child Jesus? The object which we professedly pray for may not be such as we know to be contrary to the will, or inconsistent with the glory of God—for few, I believe, would have the hardihood to offer up such a prayer—nay, the language which we utter may be expressive of what is in itself good, and of something also, that we really stand in need of. But if there be with all this, a secret indulgence in known sin, and sin, too, which we are determined to retain, or, what is the same thing, which we feel no desire, and have formed no determination to relinquish; then we are not only seeking to make a compromise between the will of God and our own, but we are virtually employing the name of Christ to sanction our attempt at such a compromise; and in what an impressive light does this consideration place the statement of our text, that "if we regard iniquity in our heart, the Lord will not hear us?"

But, obvious as this consideration must be, to every one who will reflect seriously on the subject, there is reason to fear that the case supposed in the text—that of professedly praying, while iniquity is regarded in the heart, is no uncommon one. And, in illustration of this remark, I would refer, in the first instance, to the case of those who, from education, or example, or some indistinct impressions of the truth, have been trained by others, or have tied themselves down to the prac-

tice of regularly going about the observance of prayer, but who have always regarded it rather as a necessary task, which habit may have rendered easy, than as a valuable privilege which is in itself a pleasure; and who are not conscious of deriving from it any other satisfaction than merely the reflection that they have discharged a duty by doing something which is in itself good, and which, as enjoined by the command of God, it might be unsafe to neglect. Of such persons it may indeed be alleged, that they do not come within the case supposed in the text—that of praying unto the Lord while they regard iniquity in their heart—inasmuch as they cannot, with any truth or propriety, be said to pray at all; and unquestionably the last part of the remark is but too true. Though they may have an indefinite kind of hope that some benefit is to be derived from the practice of what they understand by prayer, just as they expect to reap advantages from all the other formal observances which, in their estimation, go to constitute religion; yet if they employ the language in which prayers for spiritual blessings are wont to be expressed, they must be conscious that they have no distinct idea at the moment of what that language means, and far less any serious expectation of an immediate and unequivocal answer to such petitions. Could they be brought to reflect that prayer is essentially a mental exercise; did they bear in mind

that language belongs to it only as an accident, and because we naturally clothe in words an idea of which we have a very strong or vivid impression; and were they conscious that there may be put forth the mightiest effort of desire, without the utterance of a single expression, while the most energetic language may be employed, without any such effort of desire at all; it could hardly fail to become a question with themselves, whether through the whole course of a prayer-repeating life, they had ever once in reality prayed. If they have been accustomed to engage in any thing like the form of prayer at all, it must have been professedly at times the subject of their supplications, that God would impart to them the comforting sense of his favour, through the peace-speaking blood of Christ; that he would subdue in their hearts the power and the love of sin, by implanting there supreme love to himself; that he would communicate to them the gracious influences of the Holy Ghost, that they may be sanctified wholly in soul, in body, and in spirit; that he would render them in all things submissive to his will, and satisfied with his appointments; and that he would glorify himself by giving testimony to the word of his grace, in the conversion and sanctification of others. But they must be conscious, if they would subject the state and the operations of the inner man to a careful examination, that when they professedly offer up these or-

dinary and oft repeated supplications, there is within them no effort or activity of desire at all corresponding to such expressions; that they do not feel as if they would will the accomplishment of all this, if they had but the power of effecting what they willed; and that it is not under a sense of the utter impotency of their own will, that they direct their thoughts and desires to him, whose will they believe is able to affect it all. I may have failed, perhaps, in this representation, to set before them, in an intelligible light, what it is that constitutes the essence of prayer. Yet I am persuaded, that the same language, if employed about what they feel, and how they are inwardly exercised, while soliciting from a fellow-creature what they believe to be essential to their comfort, would be perfectly intelligible. If they find any difficulty, therefore, in understanding it as applied to spiritual things, is it not just another evidence, that on these subjects they have never had any thing corresponding to what they feel with regard to temporal comforts? and if so, then upon what ground, it may be asked, can they suppose that they have ever prayed at all?

But though this is the true light in which to contemplate the condition of such persons as I now refer to, still they come under the case supposed in the text, inasmuch as they do professedly pray; and if their prayers are not heard, as they assuredly cannot be, it is because they regard

iniquity in their heart. However erroneous may be the idea which they entertain of prayer, and however far it may be from their thoughts really to expect, that the petitions which they utter will be literally interpreted, and immediately granted; yet they do avowedly address God, and they must expect that ultimately some evil will be avoided, or some good secured by their doing so, otherwise they would not continue a practice which in itself yields them so little either of profit or of pleasure. But that they are all the while regarding iniquity in their heart, is but too obvious, even independently of any particular sin which they may be secretly indulging, or any ungodly practice to which they may be addicted; for have they not desires and affections, which not only may, but must be occupied about something? are there not hopes and fears inseparable from the present life, by which they will at times be elated or depressed? and is it not necessary to their very existence, that the principles of their intellectual and moral nature should be frequently interested, and actively employed? And if, amidst the succession of objects about which these principles are busied, they find nothing in God and eternal things in which to be deeply interested, or about which they can be actively exercised: do not all their other objects of interest and pursuit, however laudable in themselves, bear the impress of ungodliness, inasmuch as they form part of a sys-

tem which goes to widen their separation from God? and if they know what it is every day to have their powers of thought and mental exertion called forth by worldly things, while they can give utterance to the language of supplication in the divine presence for what relates to his glory, and does most nearly concern their eternal well-being, without one conscious effort of desire for the accomplishment of what they professedly ask, or one feeling of their absolute dependance on him in whose name they ask it; is it not evident that such prayers "must be an abomination in the sight of God," and that while they thus "regard iniquity in their heart, the Lord will not hear them?"

But, though the text, I think, admits of the application that I have now made of it, it is evident that the Psalmist spoke it with a reference to himself, and that it is applicable, therefore, to a very different class of persons from those to whom we have been referring. The very supposition that "if he regarded iniquity in his heart the Lord would not hear him," implies the possibility that such may be the state even of believers; and there is abundant reason to fear that it is in this way their prayers are so often hindered, and their supplications so frequently remain unanswered. Nor is it difficult to conceive how believers may be chargeable with regarding iniquity in their heart, even amidst all the solemnity of coming in-

to the immediate presence of God, and directly addressing him in the language of prayer and supplication. It is possible that they may put themselves into such a situation, in a state of mind but little fitted for engaging in that holy exercise; the world, in one form or another, may for the time have the ascendency in their hearts; and there may have been so much formality in their confessions, and so much indifference in their supplications, that when the exercise is over, they could not honestly declare, that they really meant what they acknowledged, or seriously desired what they prayed for. A Christian, it is true, could not be contented to remain in a state like this; and when he is awakened from it, as he sooner or later will be, he cannot fail to look back upon it with humiliation and shame. But we fear there are seasons in which believers themselves may make a very near approach to such a state; and what then is the true interpretation of prayers offered up at such a moment? It is in fact just saying, that there is something which, for the time, they prefer to what they are formally asking of God; that though the blessings which they do ask may be for a time withheld, yet they would find a compensation in the enjoyment of the worldly things which do at the moment engross their affections; and that in reality they would not choose to have at that instant such an abundant communication of spiritual influ-

ence imparted to them, as would render these worldly objects less valuable in their estimation, and would turn the whole tide of their affections and desires towards spiritual things. The Christian will no doubt revolt at the idea of thus dealing falsely by the God of truth, in professedly asking what at the moment he would be afraid or unwilling to receive. Yet such is the true state of things, as often as formality and indifference in prayer do directly proceed from the reigning influence of worldly desires; and the very humiliation which the believer feels when he looks back upon such seasons, is just an acknowledgment, that then "he was regarding iniquity in his heart." The same observations, too, will apply to another case, which I am persuaded the experience of many will tell them is no uncommon one. The Christian may sometimes betake himself to prayer, to ask counsel of God in some perplexity regarding divine truth, or to seek direction in some doubtful point of duty; but instead of being prepared fairly to exercise his judgment, in the hope that, while doing so, the considerations that lie on the side of truth will be made to his mind clear and convincing; he may have allowed his inclinations so to influence and bias his judgment towards the side of error, or in favour of the line of conduct which he wishes to pursue, that when he asks counsel, it may only be in the hope that his previous opi-

nion will be confirmed, and when he seeks direction, it is in reality on a point about which he was previously determined. And is it wonderful, therefore, if in the former of these cases, the blessings which he professedly sought are withheld, or if in the latter he was permitted, notwithstanding his supplication for divine direction, to be entangled in error, or overtaken by sin? "He was regarding iniquity in his heart, and therefore the Lord would not hear him."

But the principle stated in our text may be still farther illustrated, by referring to another case which I fear is also but too common; and in which the believer may be still more directly chargeable with regarding iniquity in his heart. It is possible that there may be in his heart or life something which he is conscious is not altogether as it should be—some earthly attachment which he cannot easily justify—or some point of conformity to the maxims and practices of the world, which he finds it difficult to reconcile with Christian principle; and yet all the struggle which these have from time to time cost him, may only have been an effort of ingenuity on his part to retain them, without doing direct violence to his conscience—a laborious getting up of arguments whereby to show, how they may be defended, or in what way they may be lawfully gone into, while the true and simple reason of his going into them, namely the love of the world, is all the

while kept out of view. And as an experimental proof how weak and inconclusive all these arguments are, and at the same time how unwilling he still is to relinquish his favourite objects, he may be conscious that in confessing his sins he leaves them out of the enumeration, rather because he would willingly pass them over, than because he is convinced that they need not be there; he may feel that he cannot and dare not make them the immediate subject of solemn and deliberate communing with God; and after all his multiplied and ingenious defences, he may be reconciled to them at last, only by ceasing to agitate the question, whether they are lawful or not. Now, in such a case, the sin with which he is chargeable is not to be measured by the amount of moral delinquency which attaches to the practices themselves. These may not be very flagrant in their nature, or very palpably at variance with any express requirement of the divine law. But if they be such as that he dare not ask permission of God to go in with them, or that he would not willingly abide by the decision of God's word concerning them, from a secret misgiving that this decision might be against them; then, upon this single ground alone, independently of every other consideration, he stands self-condemned. If, in this condition, then, he betakes himself to prayer —if he feels anxiety and doubt concerning his spiritual state, and seeks to have his conscience

pacified by the application of the blood of Christ—if he is conscious that his desires after spiritual things are feeble, and asks divine influence to strengthen and sustain them—and generally, if he is sensible that his soul, with regard to its eternal concerns, is not in a healthful state, and prays that he may be quickened and revived; is it at all unaccountable that such prayers should go unanswered—that he should fail to be delivered from the depressing sense of sin on the conscience, while he is deliberately surrendering himself to the power of sin in the heart—or that there should be withheld that divine consolation which, in his case, would go to sanction the violation of the divine law? He may feel, indeed, and he may deeply lament the depression of his hopes, and the decay of his spiritual comfort; and in order to recover it he may laboriously give himself to the observance of religious ordinances. But should they all successively fail to bring him relief, as in such circumstances they must do, it is not difficult to assign the reason. There is in his own heart a root of bitterness whereby he is defiled; he is himself the Achan that troubleth the host of Israel, and has given his spiritual adversaries the advantage over him; he carries about with him the accursed thing that blights and withers his spiritual strength; he "regards iniquity in his heart, and therefore the Lord will not hear him."

Such are some of the cases in which the state described in our text may be exemplified, and against which believers themselves may require to be warned; nor would it be difficult to multiply particular instances of prayer being hindered and remaining unanswered, because iniquity is regarded in the heart. I am persuaded, however, that no Christian who makes it a subject of serious inquiry, and gives himself to the exercise of self-examination, will fail to apply the truth before us to his own peculiar circumstances; or fail to perceive also in that truth, a striking illustration of the wisdom and rectitude of God, and of the purifying tendency of the whole economy of grace, in the inseparable connexion that has thus been established between growing spiritual comfort, and progressive advancement in all holiness of heart and life. We do not indeed mean to assert, nor can our text be understood as teaching, that the sinner must be holy, before he is able or is warranted to taste of the consolation which the gospel brings. It is just, in fact, the conciousness of guilt,—the intolerable pressure of a sense of sin,—the feeling that his iniquities are a burden too heavy for him to bear, that does most frequently excite the sinner to a careful inquiry into the nature and meaning of the gospel message; and if he understands and believes that message as the testimony of God, then the more feelingly alive that he was to the number and the

magnitude of his offences, the more lively will be the joy which the glad tidings of the gospel awaken. But his very acquiescence in the proposals which it makes, when it tenders to him a free remission through the blood of Christ, and places at his acceptance pardon, and reconciliation, and eternal life, necessarily implies a willingness on his part to relinquish all sin; to suppose the contrary is not only an inconsistency, but a palpable contradiction; and he will soon learn in his experience, that he cannot retain the joyful consciousness of having escaped the condemnation of sin, if he remains a stranger to the comfort of being gradually emancipated from its debasing influence. To regard iniquity in his heart, therefore—to adhere knowingly and deliberately to what is inconsistent with the purity which he professedly aims at, is virtually to abandon the principle on which he first embraced the overtures of the gospel; nor will it fail to affect, not only the growing comfort which ever accompanies a growing conformity to the divine will, but the peace and the joy also which he experienced, when he first looked up to God as his reconciled Father in Christ. The Christian, indeed, may not be in danger of deliberately, and at once giving himself up to the practice of what he knows to be sinful. But he is ever in danger of being gradually ensnared by what will at length make a very near approach to presumptuous sin, and so

entangled that he may be unwilling to relinquish it, even when its true character can be no longer concealed. If he would be on his guard, then, against such a snare, let him be full and honest in his confessions to God; let him make conscience of laying open his heart, and solemnly setting in order, before his heavenly Father, every thing in his character about which he has any doubt; and let him take the alarm as soon as he discovers that on any point such a confession becomes difficult or painful. The supposition, that it may be so, is no fanciful state of things. "When I kept silence," says the Psalmist, "my bones waxed old; for day and night thy hand was heavy upon me." And what was it that brought him relief under this depression? He has himself answered the question. "I acknowledged my sin unto thee, and mine iniquity have I not hid." "I said I will confess my transgressions unto the Lord; and thou forgavest the iniquity of my sin." And is not all this in accordance with the experience of the believer? Are there not seasons when he can hardly bring himself to express in language before God, all that an oppressed conscience would prompt him to say? would he not at times willingly evade the necessity of entering plainly and minutely into all the humbling circumstances of his ingratitude and guilt? and has he not been tempted at such times, if not to palliate his offence, at least

to mitigate in some degree the bitterness of confession, by a general and silent acknowledgment, rather than by a detailed and explicit declaration of all its aggravations? Even on the supposition, however, that all this refers to past delinquencies which he is now resolved to abandon, still it will be found that a full and undisguised confession is essentially involved in a new application to the blood of Christ, and therefore essential to his comfort. It is necessary, as has been emphatically observed by a very holy man, that the Christian should thus "anticipate the great accuser, take off the stroke of his accusation, and be able to say, you need not, I confess all, and more than you can say." But if it is about something which the believer is still inclined to retain, that he feels this difficulty in confessing all, then, indeed, it is a most alarming indication; it will assuredly prove a canker at the root of all his comfort; and he will have reason in his bitter experience to say, "I regarded iniquity in my heart, and therefore the Lord would not hear me."

SERMON XXI.

OUR SALVATION WROUGHT OUT WITH FEAR AND TREMBLING.

PHIL. ii. 12.

Work out your own salvation with fear and trembling.

It may perhaps be supposed, that in illustrating so plain and solemn an admonition as that contained in the text, it is only necessary to remind those whom we address, of the magnitude and importance of the work which the apostle urges upon the Philippians, and to state the considerations by which his admonition is enforced. I am persuaded, however, that there are few passages of Scripture that are more liable to be misunderstood, than this very sentence, and few, therefore, that require a more careful examination, to ascertain the precise import of the language which the apostle employs. The man who, in the pride of self-righteousness, takes a survey of the many virtues, by which his character has been dignified

and adorned, and flattering himself that these virtues will be found immeasurably to outweigh what he calls the failings and imperfections of his nature, confidently calculates on acquittal in the day of reckoning, will be ready to urge the admonition in our text in defence of his scheme, and to allege, that it recognises man's own righteousness, as the ground of his acceptance in the sight of God. In like manner, the perplexed inquirer, who, from a misapprehension of the nature of the gospel, and in the despondency of a false humility, is laboriously striving to silence an awakened conscience, by yielding the obedience in which he has hitherto fallen short, will be equally ready to infer from the text, that however far he may still be from a place of security and repose, yet the only way to it is that which he is pursuing; and that there is nothing for him but just to struggle on, under the depressing weight of all the suspicion and uncertainty, in which he is already involved. The two characters may indeed appear to be very different, and in many respects they may really be so. But they are nevertheless acting upon principles essentially the same—both are going about to establish a righteousness of their own, as the basis of their hopes—and both will be ready to understand the text as inculcating some work or service, in the way of personal righteousness, on the accomplishment of which their acceptance with God

is made to depend. It is not enough, then, that we earnestly inculcate that admonition, in the simple and detached form in which it has now been stated; inasmuch as the one class might understand us as merely urging them to add to the number of those virtuous qualifications, on the strength of which they are already reckoning on the divine approbation, while, by the other, we should be understood as asserting, that by laborious and persevering efforts, they might hope one day to triumph over all the uncertainty which still hangs over the subject of pardon and justification in the sight of God; and thus it might happen, that the more earnestly we inculcate the apostle's admonition, the more directly should we minister to the false hopes of both, and contribute to the strength of opinions the most unscriptural, and therefore the most unsafe.

It is impossible to reflect on the undeniable fact, that much indistinctness of conception cleaves to many, on the subject of the sinner's acceptance with God, without perceiving that the remarks now submitted are but too well founded; and that without a careful inquiry into the precise import of the apostle's language, the admonition before us is liable to be grievously perverted or misunderstood. I would observe, therefore, in entering on the illustration of the text, that when he admonishes the Philippians to work out their own salvation with fear and trembling, the apostle

cannot be understood as intimating, that they were required to work out for themselves such a righteousness as might procure for them the remission of their sins, and the acceptance of their persons in the sight of God—and for this plain reason among others, that such an admonition would stand directly opposed to the whole scope and tenor of his own writings. On no subject, indeed, has the apostle written at greater length, or with more apparent anxiety, if I may so speak, to avoid being misunderstood, than the doctrine of justification; and if there be any one truth more clearly established in these writings than another, it is just this, "that by deeds of law shall no flesh living be justified in the sight of God." To demonstrate the universal depravity of mankind as transgressors of the divine law, whether directly revealed and recorded, or handed down by tradition, or suggested by the works and providence of God—to show the utter impossibility of a sinner being restored to the divine favour, on the ground of any obedience or righteousness of his own—to state and explain the doctrine of a free remission through faith in the blood of Christ, as that by which God declares his righteousness, or manifests himself to be just in treating the sinner as righteous—and to vindicate this doctrine from the objections urged against it by the unbelieving Jews, on the ground of its alleged immoral tendency, are the

leading objects of the apostle's letter to the Romans. And having at great length, and with marvellous power of reasoning established these fundamental points, he shows the fatal consequences of resting the hope of pardon on any other foundation than the perfect righteousness of Christ, by referring to the case of his own countrymen, for whom he had "great heaviness and continual sorrow in his heart," and of whom he says that they had not "attained to the law of righteousness, because they sought it not by faith, but as it were by the works of the law, having stumbled at that stumbling stone." "For they," says he, "being ignorant of God's righteousness, and going about to establish their own righteousness, have not submitted themselves unto the righteousness of God." And can it then be for a moment supposed, that he would inculcate upon the Philippians, the very delusion against which he was so anxious, and laboured so strenuously to guard his Roman converts? or that he would have set the former on the same hopeless task of working out a justifying obedience for themselves, which he assured the latter had proved a stumbling block to the fall and ruin of multitudes of his own brethren, his kinsmen according to the flesh?

But it will be farther evident that the fulfilment of some condition, or the performance of some great work, whereby the sinner may seal

his reconciliation with God, is not, and cannot be the object of the admonition in our text, if we advert for a moment to the character and condition of the persons, to whom the admonition was addressed. The apostle was writing, it must be remembered, to Christians, or what is the same thing, as far as regards the meaning of what he wrote, to persons whom he believed to be Christians, and of whom he had previously said in this very letter, that "he thanked God upon every remembrance of them for their fellowship in the gospel from the first day till that time"—that "he was confident of this very thing, that he who had begun a good work in them would perform it until the day of Jesus Christ"—and that "unto them it had been given in the behalf of Christ, not only to believe on him, but also to suffer for his sake." When he urged them, therefore, to work out their own salvation, they could not suppose, that by this expression he was inculcating the necessity of their working out such a personal righteousness, as might give them a claim to the divine favour. The whole tenor of his letter proceeds upon the supposition, that they understood and believed the doctrine of justification by faith in Christ; he addresses them in fact, as persons who knew the grace of God in truth, and were experimentally acquainted with peace and joy in believing; and instead, therefore, of being designed to explain how it is that the sinner is

reconciled to God, the text actually assumes, that in the case of those to whom it is addressed, this momentous question has already been determined.

Having thus endeavoured to show, that our text affords no countenance to the idea, that personal righteousness constitutes, in any way, or to any extent, the ground of the sinner's reconciliation to God; I proceed to inquire what is implied in the admonition, "work out your own salvation;" and it may aid us in this inquiry to consider the admonition in connexion with the preceding context. "If there be therefore," says the apostle at the beginning of the chapter, "any consolation in Christ, if any comfort of love, if any fellowship of the Spirit, if any bowels and mercies, fulfil ye my joy, that ye be like-minded, having the same love, being of one accord, of one mind. Let nothing be done through strife or vain glory; but in lowliness of mind, let each esteem others better than themselves. Look not every man on his own things, but every man also on the things of others." It thus appears, that the leading object of the whole passage was to inculcate upon the Philippians the cultivation of all those graces and virtues of the Christian character, the exercise of which constitutes the perfection and blessedness of intelligent creatures. In doing so, he appealed to their own experience, in testimony of the reality and value of the everlasting consolation and good hope

through grace, which accompanies the faith of the gospel; and he employed the same argument which he did in his epistle to the Romans, when he "besought them by the mercies of God to present their bodies living sacrifices, holy, acceptable unto God." It is worthy of remark, too, that in urging his admonition, the apostle exhibits in his own person a very striking exemplification of the spirit which he inculcates upon his converts; and that his argument is rendered peculiarly forcible and affecting by the circumstance, that he scarcely appears conscious of furnishing them with any such example. In admonishing them on the subject of the humility and kindness and brotherly affection which, as Christians, it became them to cherish towards one another, he might, in all fairness, have referred to the affection and generosity which had been manifested towards them on his part; and we cannot doubt that the Philippians would have readily acknowledged, that he was fully entitled to do so. He does not, however, formally refer to his own character and conduct, as a pattern for their imitation; but when, without any apparent design of doing so, and obviously under the simple impulse of affection and paternal solicitude for their welfare, he represents the cultivation of that Christian temper towards one another, as "fulfilling his joy," he does what is essentially the same thing; while the manner in which it is

stated gives peculiar force and tenderness to his argument.

But, in addition to all these considerations, the apostle had in reserve a still more powerful argument wherewith to enforce his admonition; and one which serves to explain what it was that he was so anxious to inculcate upon them, at the same time that it furnishes the most persuasive motive, that can be addressed to the understanding and the heart of a Christian. In the fifth verse he sums up the graces which he had previously inculcated upon them, in the single emphatic expression, "the mind that was in Christ Jesus;" bringing before them an affecting view of the original inherent glory of our Lord's divine nature,—his infinite condescension in taking upon him the likeness of our sinful flesh—his patient endurance of all the reproach, and the persecution which it was necessary to undergo, if the redemption of sinners was to be accomplished—and his exaltation, in his mediatorial character, to the right hand of God; and it is after this exhibition of our Lord's character, as at once an example for their imitation, and a ground of encouragement, that he adds in the verse from which our text is taken, "Wherefore, my beloved, as ye have always obeyed, not as in my presence only, but now much more in my absence, work out your own salvation."

It is obvious, then, I conceive, that by the

term salvation, as here employed by the apostle, we are to understand that entire conformity to the image of the Son of God which constitutes the perfection, and consequently the blessedness of our nature. The word salvation, indeed, taken in its most extended acceptation, and as it is frequently employed in Scripture, comprehends the whole of that deliverance which has been wrought out by Christ, both as it refers to the pardon, and as it relates to the sanctification of sinners. It is sometimes used, however, with a special reference to the latter; and it cannot, I think, require any lengthened argument to show, that, when so employed, it refers to what constitutes the great and ultimate design of the whole plan of redemption, in as far as mankind are personally concerned. That, as sinners, we are under condemnation is true; and it is equally true, that the very first step towards a removal of the evils, and the application of an effectual remedy to the diseases of our fallen nature, is deliverance from the curse of that law which we have violated: nor can this deliverance ever be effected in any other way, than by a free remission of sin through the blood of atonement. But it is never to be forgotten, that besides bringing us into condemnation, and subjecting us to a sentence which, if not repealed, must sooner or later be followed up with the infliction of the threatened penalty, sin has also produced the most desolat-

ing and ruinous effects in our moral nature—rendering us incapable, as well as unworthy, of enjoying the happiness arising from communion with God—and bringing us into a state which the Scriptures have emphatically denominated spiritual death; and that before we can be made perfectly and permanently happy, this ruin of our moral constitution must be repaired, and the malignant principle which wrought it must be counteracted and destroyed. It is not enough, then, for creatures so ruined and debased, that the sentence of their condemnation be repealed, and that they be judicially acquitted of the guilt of sin. Such an acquittal, considered in its own nature, is simply the determination of the divine mind respecting us; that determination does not in itself effect a change, or in any other way actually operate on the moral principles of our nature; and unless, therefore, the judicial act whereby the sentence of condemnation is cancelled, and a sentence of acquittal substituted in its room, be accompanied or followed up by a transformation of our nature itself, that act would not and could not put us in possession of the blessedness for which, as intelligent and immortal beings, we are designed. It is true, indeed, in point of fact, that when God in his mercy has extended forgiveness to a sinner, his gracious procedure will never in any case stop short there; that none who have been acquitted of the guilt of sin will

ever be left to remain permanently under its pollution; that the very circumstance of a sinner being persuaded so to believe in Christ as to be accepted of God, is itself a proof that he has at the same time undergone a very great and decided change; and that we ought not, therefore, to conceive of pardon and regeneration as if they could in reality be separated. But we may so far conceive of them apart as to see, that they are essentially two different things; that pardon, though of infinite importance, and indispensable to the restoration of the happiness which we have forfeited, is rather a pledge of our salvation than salvation itself; that to be saved necessarily implies our being made the subjects of such an operation wrought upon our nature, as may rescue it from the polluting and debasing influence of sin, and subordinate its every affection and feeling to the will of God; that salvation, therefore, is a progressive work, consisting in a growing confidence in Christ's righteousness, and a growing conformity to his image; and that this work is accomplished only when the transformation is complete, and the impress of the divine likeness is rendered perfect and permanent.

If such, then, be the true state of the case, it is abundantly evident, that the admonition in our text to work out our own salvation, is as necessary as it is impressive—and just for this obvious reason, that if this salvation be effected at all, it must

be effected with our consent—it must carry with it the full acquiescence of our will—and necessarily implies the active exercise of all our moral principles in resisting sin, and pursuing holiness. We cannot, indeed, suppose that the apostle meant to represent the sanctification of our nature as the result of our own unaided efforts, any more than he has represented justification as the reward of our own righteousness. But he did assuredly mean to say, that as a cordial acquiescence in God's testimony concerning his Son is necessarily implied in the faith, by which the sinner is accepted; so persevering efforts after the attainment of universal holiness, are necessarily implied in the believer's progressive sanctification. To suppose the contrary, would be to advance the palpable contradiction, that a sinner may be saved against his will; or, in other words, that a rational creature may have his will renewed, his affections transferred from one object to another, and an entirely new scheme of happiness substituted in the room of one which he had previously formed —and all this not only without his consent, but in direct opposition to his inclinations. In fact, the conversion of sinners from darkness to light, and from the power of Satan unto God, is represented in Scripture as their being made willing in a day of divine power; and though every holy desire, therefore, and every saving impression, must be traced to the Spirit of all Grace as their

author, yet so necessarily are the efforts of believers involved in this work of the Spirit, that when he does efficaciously operate, the fruits of his operation appear, in that cordial acceptation of the truth, that abiding in Christ, and that cultivation of every Christian grace, which the apostle here denominates "working out their own salvation."

It appears, then, from the very constitution of our nature, as well as from God's method of dealing with us as rational and accountable creatures, that there is an intimate and inseparable connexion between the exercise of a divine power on his part, and persevering efforts after holy attainments on ours, in the business of our salvation; and that our progress in the divine life will always be in proportion to the eagerness which we feel, and the exertions which we make for advancing. So closely related, indeed, is our diligence to our advancement, that they may be considered as actually identified; and instead of representing the one as the consequence of the other, it would perhaps be a more correct statement to say, that our earnestness of desire and of effort to advance is itself our advancement. The whole scope of the apostle's writings, and of the New Testament at large, forbids us to suppose that there is any resting-place in the Christian course short of its termination; or that we are warranted, at any period, to relax our diligence,

as if our growth in the divine life would go on, in consequence of the vigorous and long continued efforts that we have previously made. The apostle Peter urges his converts " to give diligence to make their calling and election sure, and so an entrance should be ministered unto them abundantly into the everlasting kingdom of our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ." In writing to Timothy, the apostle Paul admonishes him to " fight the good fight of faith, and lay hold on eternal life, whereunto he was also called." In his epistle to the Corinthians, where he represents the Christian life as a race, and the crown of glory as the prize, and where he urges them so to run that they might obtain, he enforces his admonition by a reference to himself, declaring that he " kept under his body, and brought it into subjection ; lest that by any means, when he had preached to others, he himself should be a cast-away." And in the third chapter of this same epistle to the Philippians, we find him speaking of himself in precisely the same terms. " Brethren, I count not myself to have apprehended"—that is, I count not myself to have obtained, in the same sense in which he urged the Corinthians so to run that they might obtain— " but this one thing I do, forgetting those things which are behind, and reaching forth unto those things which are before; I press towards the mark for the prize of the high calling of God in

Christ Jesus." Of the foundation of his hopes and the security of the sacred deposit which he had given into the Redeemer's hands, the apostle had no doubt; for "he knew whom he had believed, and he was persuaded that he was able to keep that which he had committed to him against that day." But his confidence was not of a kind to permit him separating between a sense of security, and the habitual recollection of the truth on which that security rested; or to allow him to sit easy under any relaxation of diligence or of duty. His hope in Christ was infinitely too dear to him, to leave him in the enjoyment of peace and comfort, while the foundation of that hope was either obscured or forgotten; in a concern so unspeakably momentous to him as the accomplishment of his salvation, he could not for any length of time remain contentedly doubtful, whether it was going on or standing still; the more largely that he had tasted of peace and joy in believing, and the nearer he approached the termination of his conflict, the more anxious did he feel, lest he should forfeit his comfort, or lose any thing of his conquest; and it is evident, therefore, that he was giving utterance to his own experience, when he admonished the Philippians to "work out their own salvation with fear and trembling."

It thus appears, that what the apostle here inculcates, is in no respect inconsistent with the

security and comfort which flow from a pacified conscience, or with the everlasting consolation and good hope through grace, which the believer experiences when, " being justified by faith, he has peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ." Our text itself, viewed in connexion with what the apostle elsewhere says of his own state, is virtually a declaration, that the necessity of working out his salvation with fear and trembling, did not interfere with his peace, or mar his spiritual comfort; and when he urged the same solicitude and watchfulness on the Philippians, the whole tenor of his letter shows, that it was for the very purpose of strengthening their hopes, and securing for them the undisturbed enjoyment of a consoling sense of the divine favour. In a preceding part of the epistle, he expresses his confidence that " he should abide in the flesh, and continue with them all for their furtherance and joy of faith; that their rejoicing might be more abundant in Jesus Christ for him, by his coming to them again :" and subsequently to his having urged upon them the admonition in our text, we find him thus addressing them, " Finally, my brethren, rejoice in the Lord. Rejoice in the Lord alway; and again I say rejoice. Be careful for nothing; but in every thing by prayer and supplication, with thanksgiving, let your request be made known unto God; and the peace of God, which passeth all understanding, shall

keep your hearts and minds through Christ Jesus." The apostle then was not at all afraid, that the admonition before us would make any inroad on the peace of his Philippian converts, either by unsettling their faith, or overcasting their hopes; nor is it difficult to see that the admonition, as he meant it to be understood, could not possibly have any such effect. It must be a matter of familiar observation to all, and I doubt not of actual experience with many, that a principle of fear enters largely into the feelings, which an affectionate child habitually cherishes towards the parent whom he loves and reveres; that the more highly he respects the character, and estimates the favour of his parent, the more feelingly alive will he be to the fear of offending him; and that just in proportion to the strength of his filial affection, will be his trembling anxiety to maintain that place in his father's affections, which it is his chief happiness to enjoy, and would be an unexpressible calamity to forfeit. But who would ever think of comparing this kind of fear with the slavish dread arising from a suspicion, that the father on whose favour he sets so high a value, is not kindly and affectionately disposed towards him? who that knows any thing experimentally of what filial affection means, would venture to say, that such a fear could ever shake his confidence in a father's love, or mar the pleasure which he derives from the smile of a father's

approbation? or who can require to be told, that this very principle of filial fear gives inexpressible tenderness to the endearing intercourse of a family circle? And just so is it between the believer and his heavenly father. In this state of impurity and imperfection, where the Christian is conscious of a perpetual tendency to forget his Maker, and to allow some unworthy object to dispute with God the supremacy in his affections, the fear of forfeiting the divine favour is inseparable from a deep sense of the infinite value of that favour; while so much remains to be purified, and so many unsanctified principles to be subdued, there must be an anxious solicitude lest the work of salvation should be arrested or retarded; and the more that the believer has enjoyed liberty of access to the throne of grace, and freedom of fellowship with the Father, the more deeply will he feel the necessity of "working out that salvation with fear and trembling."

Such appears to be the truth taught in our text, as well as inculcated by the general tenor of Scripture; and I am persuaded that the remarks now submitted will be found to accord with the experience of every one, who has felt that the Christian life is a warfare, requiring constant, and vigorous, and persevering efforts; and who has also learned, that "except he abide in Christ he can do nothing." It would however be taking a very imperfect view of the subject did we rest

satisfied with merely showing, that the sentiments inculcated in the text are inseparable from the conviction that salvation is the one thing needful; and that there is nothing in them incompatible with the peace and joy which the glad tidings of the gospel, when clearly understood and cordially received, never fail to impart. If what has already been advanced be in accordance with truth and Scripture, the Christian will readily perceive that the fear and trembling inculcated by the apostle, is to be regarded, not as an evil or inevitable misfortune that cleaves to the imperfection of our nature, but as a principle by which the most important purposes are served in the economy of grace. It is a doctrine of Scripture, that they "who have been turned from darkness unto light, and from the power of Satan unto God," shall have grace given them to persevere; that "he who has begun a good work in them, will perform it unto the day of Jesus Christ;" that of them who have been given to the Son, as the reward of his mediatorial work, none can possibly be lost; that "they are kept by the mighty power of God through faith unto salvation;" and that Christ "will raise them up at the last day." But it would be directly at variance with the whole scope of Scripture doctrine to suppose, that this perseverance of the saints is secured, by such an exercise of mere power on the part of God, as forcibly hedges in their way, and

constrains them to walk in it without any consent or concurrence on their part; or that it is provided for and perfected in such a manner, as to leave them altogether unconcerned whether it should fail or succeed. Nor is there any passage of Scripture, perhaps, that stands more distinctly opposed to such an idea, than the verse before us, inasmuch as the persons whom the apostle admonishes to work out their own salvation with fear and trembling, are the very persons of whom he had the instant before expressed his confidence, that "he who had begun a good work in them, would perform it until the day of Jesus Christ." Our text therefore is a very unequivocal declaration on the part of the apostle, that if believers do not fall away, it is because they are habitually and powerfully influenced by the fear of so falling; that if the work of their salvation is carried on and ultimately perfected, it is because they are feelingly alive to the danger of its being arrested or retarded; that they are thus saved by fear, just as it is elsewhere said that they are saved by hope; and that by the operation of this principle, the doctrine of the perseverance of the saints is shown to be in perfect consistency with their responsibility as intelligent and accountable creatures.

It were easy indeed, to multiply perplexing questions on the subject of this doctrine, and we fear that such questions have furnished topics

of idle and unprofitable discussion to many, with whom the gospel has never assumed a more interesting aspect, than merely as a subject of intellectual exercise. The Christian life, however, consists not of metaphysical speculation; and the believer will soon be convinced, by the most overwhelming of all arguments, the argument of experience, that he is labouring under some grievous mistake, or is guilty of some mischievous perversion of the truth, if he finds in the doctrine of perseverance, any thing else than an encouragement and an impulse to persevere. When he feels that the world is in the way of gaining an ascendency in his heart—that his affections are beginning to lose their hold of spiritual and divine things—that his communion with God is more frequently interrupted, and yields him less satisfaction—and that he is not so scrupulous as he once was, on many points that involve the glory of God and the honour of the Redeemer; it would appear to him at such a moment a very fearful and revolting idea to satisfy himself with the reflection, that he cannot fall away—to lull himself into security by persuading himself that he is safe, while every thing about him gives him the most distinct intimation that he is in danger—and to harden himself in his growing indifference by speculating on the doctrine of perseverance, at the very moment that he is conscious of ceasing to persevere. If he thinks at all, he must perceive that a cloud is

beginning to interpose between him and the light of his Father's countenance; if the light of that countenance has ever been precious to him, he must feel that the source of his richest consolation is ready to be shut up; he must be aware that the removal of the obstacle that obstructs the communication of spiritual comfort, is identified with his return to his former love; and if he has not apostatized so far as to cease putting any value on the divine favour, his anxiety will be, not to console himself with the abstract doctrine of perseverance, but how he may most speedily regain the path where alone perseverance will terminate in glory. The Christian knows that this is true, and is satisfied that it is as much in accordance with the constitution of our nature, as it is in unison with the statements of Scripture. And what then can be inferred regarding those, who feel no solicitude and concern about their progressive advancement in all holiness of heart and life, but that they have never tasted so much of the peace of believing, or felt such an accession to their comfort from the glad tidings of the gospel, as to be worth any vigorous or anxious effort on their part to retain it? for nothing, I apprehend, can be more obvious to the common understanding of every man, than that they who believe that their eternal well-being depends on their union to Christ, their abiding in him, and their growing conformity to his image, can no

more remain indifferent to their progress in the divine life, than the miser can to the increase of his treasure; and that unless such persons forget the truth, which does but too frequently happen, they never can cease to "work out their salvation with fear and trembling."

SERMON XXII.

GOD WORKING IN US A MOTIVE TO PERSEVERANCE.

PHIL. ii. 13.

For it is God which worketh in you, both to will and to do of his good pleasure.

HAVING already, in a former discourse, dwelt at considerable length on the inseparable connexion between the operation of a divine power in the sanctification of the believer, and the diligent cultivation of personal holiness on the part of the believer himself; it is unnecessary to enter more fully at present on the injunction contained in the 12th verse, as furnishing a satisfactory reply to the objections that are sometimes urged against the doctrines of free grace. That reply, however, is placed in a still more striking light by the argument stated in the text, where the apostle assigns a reason for the admonition inculcated in the preceding verse; and I cannot avoid, therefore, offering a few remarks on the scope of that

argument, as bearing upon the subject of the objection referred to.

It is alleged, on the part of those who are not very willing to admit, in all its extent, the Scripture representation of human helplessness and guilt, that when the sinner is brought to believe, that the work of his spiritual regeneration is begun, and carried on, and perfected by the power of the Holy Ghost, there will be an end to every thing like activity and diligence on his part; and that, consequently, the belief of such a doctrine must be hostile to the interests of morality and practical religion. Now, it is a remarkable fact, that the consideration which is thus represented as tending to paralyse the efforts of the believer, and to lull him into a state of indolence and indifference on the subject of his spiritual concerns, is the very consideration which the apostle makes use of, as the most powerful excitement to activity and diligence, and the most persuasive argument which he could employ, in urging his converts to work out their own salvation with fear and trembling: and surely it is not too much to expect, that they who professedly acknowledge the divine authority of Scripture should pause, before they venture to allege of any principle, that it must produce an effect the very opposite of that which an inspired apostle has declared that it is calculated as well as designed to produce. It may perhaps appear to them a very appalling state-

ment, and one from which they will be ready to revolt, but it is nevertheless the true representation of the matter, that they are placing their opinion, and that, too, upon a subject with which, in as far as the experimental knowledge of it is concerned, they are professedly unacquainted, in direct opposition to the apostle's declaration; for when the latter enjoins Christians to "work out their own salvation with fear and trembling," and by way of a solemn enforcement of this admonition, adds, "for it is God who worketh in you both to will and to do of his good pleasure," then what is it but directly to controvert this declaration to say, that by ascribing the conversion and sanctification of sinners to the agency of the Holy Ghost, we leave them without any adequate motive to the vigorous cultivation of personal holiness? This, in fact, is the plain meaning of every such objection as that which we have been considering; and in replying to it, therefore, we might satisfy ourselves with simply asking them, whether they really have the hardihood to avow such a sentiment.

But the objection is as much at variance with the acknowledged principles of our constitution, as it is with the plainest averments of Scripture. If God worketh in us both to will and to work, it is impossible that we can remain inactive and unconcerned, inasmuch as the very idea involves in it a palpable contradiction; and wherever

therefore, this power is put forth on the part of God, it must and will be followed with a corresponding activity and co-operation on our part. It is not, however, by the operation of mere power that this effect is produced. The apostle tells us, that when God works in us both to will and to do, it is of his good pleasure that he does so; or, in other words, it is out of the abundance of his beneficence—out of a gracious and compassionate regard for our eternal well-being—the dictate of a love infinitely more profound than we can estimate or conceive; and we do most confidently affirm, that the man who believes this—who is persuaded that God works in him, and does so upon such a principle and for such an end, is, by that very belief, brought under the influence of the most persuasive argument that ever was employed to awaken the energies, and call forth the efforts of an intelligent creature. It is impossible to conceive a more solemn and impressive consideration, than that of our being the immediate subjects of the operation of a holy and divine agency. To suppose that we can believe this agency to be actually operating upon us, without being deeply and powerfully affected by such a consideration, is directly to contradict the most obvious principles of our nature; and if we are seriously affected by it, in what conceivable way can it be manifested, but by an earnest desire and a constant effort towards the attainment of the

object which we believe it to be the design of that agency to accomplish? Such, I am persuaded, every man will acknowledge would be the effect of our being placed in similar circumstances with regard to our temporal concerns. Suppose, for example, that we were involved in difficulties so numerous and complicated, that no efforts of our own could avail any thing towards effecting our deliverance; but that in this state of hopeless perplexity, measures should be adopted, and means put into operation for our relief, by the interposition of one who had skill and power enough to insure their success: and what, I ask, would be the effect of such an interposition upon ourselves? Even on the supposition that we could in no way whatever contribute to the success of these measures, and that the issue of them depended entirely on the kindness and fidelity of him by whom they were put into operation; still should we not feel and manifest as deep a concern in them, as if their success were suspended on our own exertions? should we not watch over their progress with as much anxiety as if our indifference could mar, or our negligence defeat them? would not our whole manner and deportment unequivocally show that, feeble and inefficient as our exertions might be, our will at least was going out in all its strength after the accomplishment of their object? and would it not appear too evident to be doubted by any one, that

if we had the power of helping it on, that power would be put forth without reluctance or reserve? None will venture to deny that such would assuredly be the consequence of our being placed in the circumstances now supposed; and who, then, can allege, that such also will not be the effect of our being persuaded that it is God who, in the abundance of his kind intentions towards us, "works in us both to will and to do;" or that this consideration, if believed and borne in mind, can ever fail to furnish us with a powerful motive to "work out our own salvation with fear and trembling?"

With these general observations on the tendency of the doctrine taught in our text, I might proceed to make an application of the subject to Christians—appealing to their own experience for the truth of what has now been stated—and urging upon them the necessity of habitually surrendering themselves to the salutary influence, which that doctrine is designed and fitted to exercise. The remarks, however, which have now been submitted, naturally suggest some very solemn reflections regarding the condition of those who, though familiar with the sound, and professedly believing the truth of the gospel, have never felt the constraining power of the consideration urged in the text; and to that condition I would in the first instance for a moment advert. To such persons, it is obvious, we cannot address the admoni-

tion contained in the preceding context, in the same way as it is addressed to the believer; because, in their case, we cannot follow it up with the argument, by which the apostle has here enforced it. This, however, is the very circumstance that ought especially to awaken their apprehension; for if we are not warranted to say of them, that God is working in them, both to will and to do of his good pleasure; then what ground is there for any other conclusion, than that the momentous work of their salvation is yet to begin? Nor let them allege, in the way either of palliation or of excuse, that this work must commence by an act of power on the part of God, and that until this power is really employed, there can be no efficient or successful effort on their part. Such a plea is in its very nature a most daring avowal that they care not whether that work ever begin at all; and even if it were competent in any case to urge it, it is in theirs utterly inadmissible. That they have not yet become a willing people in a day of divine power, may indeed be true; but it is not true that nothing has been done on the part of God to make them so; and did they venture to plead in their own justification, that he has done nothing, the very circumstance of their knowing so much of Scripture truth as to be able, by any sort of perversion of it, to advance such a plea, would prove the fallacy as well as the presumption of

the argument. They cannot deny that God has done a great deal towards commencing and perfecting the work of their salvation. He has in the course of his providence put the Bible into their hands; it is there stated as his revealed will, "that all men should be saved, and should come unto the knowledge of the truth;" if they have read the Scriptures at all, that truth has been as unequivocally declared to them, and as earnestly urged upon their acceptance, as in the case of any other sinner: and they have had in their own history and experience, ten thousand distinct intimations of God's compassionate and gracious propension towards them. For why is it, I would ask, that their lot has been cast in a land where the gospel is known? why have they been placed in circumstances to receive, in early life, the elements of a religious education, and to enjoy, at a more advanced period, the means of spiritual improvement? why have afflictions and disappointments been so mingled up with all their worldly enjoyments, as most clearly to show them, that there is no permanent portion for them in the good things of a present life? and why has day after day been added to their season of grace, in spite of the unseen dangers by which they have been beset, and the innumerable events by which that season might have terminated? Were I as intimately acquainted with their history as they are themselves, I might perhaps

come still more close to their individual circumstances, and ask them, why they have at times been brought into situations, and led to form connexions favourable to their receiving serious impressions of divine things? why, in the private intercourse of life, or under the public ministry of the word, they have had such views of their character presented to them, and such convictions of danger awakened, as it was difficult for them to resist, and painful to them to remember? why, at such a time, and in such a place, they were so impressed with a sense of guilt, so affected by the prospect of death, or so awed by the anticipated solemnities of the judgment-seat, as to be almost ready to say, "What shall I do to be saved?" and why it is, that after the failure of so many promising appearances, and the forgetfulness of so many serious impressions, new events are still occurring, and new methods are employed for bringing them to the knowledge and the belief of the truth? Unless they have abandoned themselves to a state of absolute atheism, they must know and believe that all these events are from God, and that every circumstance that led to them was as infallibly foreseen, and as certainly appointed by him, as any event that involves the most momentous consequences. And if so, in what other light can they be regarded, than as so many unequivocal intimations how graciously and how mercifully

he is inclined towards them? Every such intimation shows, that there is no backwardness on his part to begin the work of their salvation; as often as they have read or heard the gospel, he has in fact set before them a most distinct proposal on the subject of their eternal interests; and both by the dispensations of his providence, and the methods of his grace, he has made, so to speak, an actual movement towards the commencement of that work. But if all this has never been met by any corresponding movement on their part; if his providences have been overlooked, and the ordinances of his appointment observed with all the indifference of a mere form; if they have read the Scriptures, and listened to the truths of the gospel, without any serious impression of their being then engaged in the solemn exercise of holding converse with the Spirit of all truth; if they have seldom or never made a deliberate effort to have this impression upon their spirits, while giving themselves to prayer, or any other religious duty; and if every successive Sabbath has found them as little disposed for the spirituality of such exercises as the preceding one left them; then is it at all strange or unaccountable, that they should still be in a state of insensibility and spiritual death, and still experimentally strangers to the quickening energy of the Holy Spirit? The admonition in the context, to work out their salvation with fear

and trembling, was no doubt addressed to the Philippians as believers—as persons whose hopes of justification in the sight of God were resting on the perfect righteousness wrought out by the Redeemer. But the moment they began to give their serious attention to the statement of divine truth, and to cherish the salutary impressions which the truth made upon them, they were virtually acting on the principle here inculcated; and so it must be with every other sinner. The gospel propounds to them overtures of mercy in the plainest and most intelligible terms; in doing so, it demands, at its first announcement, their most serious and reverential attention; to refuse this is to say, that they do not acquiesce in God's gracious intimations towards them; and if he does not therefore "work in them, both to will and to do of his good pleasure," it is because they will not "work out their own salvation with fear and trembling."

These remarks, while I would earnestly press them on the attention of the thoughtless and unawakened, may perhaps bring to the recollection of Christians many a painful, as well as many a pleasing circumstance in their past history—the indifference with which they frequently heard proclaimed, the glad tidings of the gospel—the patient endurance of all their waywardness and folly on the part of God—and the means by which their attention was at last arrested, when

they were persuaded to "incline their ear and come unto him—to hear that their souls might live." To such persons, then I do not hesitate to appeal for the truth of what has now been advanced, as a statement that accords with their experience, as well as commends itself to their conscience. With regard to their first conversion from darkness unto light, and from the power of Satan unto God, as well as every step that they have advanced towards the sanctification of their nature, they will humbly and gratefully acknowledge that "it is by the grace of God that they are what they are;" and when they reflect on their natural aversion to divine things—when they call to mind the conflict which they once, and perhaps for a long time maintained, in order to shut out the truth—and when they think of all the ignorance that was to be removed, and all the perverseness that required to be rectified, before they could cordially embrace the truth as it is in Jesus; they will be ready to say with admiration and self-abasement, "it is the doing of the Lord, and it is wondrous in our eyes." But they must be conscious, at the same time, that this gracious work was at first begun, and has since been carried on in perfect consistency with the obligation that rested upon them, to work out their own salvation with fear and trembling; that the very commencement of that work consisted in awakening in their minds solicitude and concern about their

spiritual state, that their knowledge and belief of the truth were accompanied with an earnest desire, and an honest effort on their part to know and believe it; that at every subsequent step of their progress, the Spirit of God gave them the will, at the same time that he gave them the power of advancing; and that from first to last they have never been able to separate between the aids of divine grace, and the exertions which they have themselves been required to make.

And while they recollect and acknowledge all this, what an impulse must it not give to every holy desire, and every new endeavour after higher attainments in the divine life? Their own experience has proved a commentary on the doctrine of Scripture, and taught them that there is an inseparable connexion between the agency of the Spirit's influence, and their own unwearied diligence; that if God works in them, it is in the way of prompting and strengthening them to work; and that perseverance on their part thus becomes a pledge to them, that there is no interruption of a divine communication on his. The doctrine of our text, therefore, while it presents the most powerful motive for quickening the sinner to serious concern about his salvation, provides also in rich abundance for his consolation and support, by holding out to him all the encouragement arising from the assurance of ultimate success; and the believer must be aware

that even on this ground alone it is a doctrine absolutely essential to his final perseverance. Without such an encouragement, the discovery of his guilt, and of the extent to which his moral nature has been debased by the influence of sin, could serve only to depress and alarm him; the idea of reaching a state of entire conformity to the divine image—a state from which he feels himself to be at an immeasurable distance—would appear to him altogether hopeless; and whatever impulse his fears might for a time give him, he would soon discover that something else was required for maintaining the conflict. But believing that his convictions of sin, and his desire to escape from it are the work of God; that this work originated in the kind and compassionate intentions of the divine mind towards him, before he was himself aware of his guilty and helpless condition; and that this compassion ceased not to follow him, till he was awakened to a sense of his danger, and persuaded to flee for refuge to the hope set before him in the gospel, he is persuaded that "he who has begun the good work will not fail to perform it until the day of Jesus Christ;" he cannot doubt that the grace which has already triumphed over the obstinacy of his carnal mind will remove every other obstacle that might retard his progress; and whatever, therefore, may be the difficulties by which he is beset, there is ample encourage-

ment provided for him in the gracious assurance, that he shall at last be more than conqueror through Christ that loved him.

Such is the support which the doctrine of our text is fitted to administer, considered with a reference to the believer's hopes; and we cannot doubt that the apostle designed it to be viewed in this light by those to whom it was addressed. It is obvious, however, from its connexion with the preceding verse, and the manner in which it is introduced, that it was essentially designed to show what reason the Philippians had to work out their salvation with fear and trembling; and it must be evident to all, that a more impressive or affecting argument, whereby to enforce that admonition, could not be conceived. I have already had occasion to observe what a solemn thing it is to think, that we are the immediate subjects of the divine agency of the Holy Spirit; and every serious mind must feel, that the idea of being so near God, and of holding such intimate communion with him as such a state implies, is a very overwhelming one, even though the soul were conscious that all its faculties were engaged in the devout contemplation of his infinite excellence, and all its feelings prepared to obey the impulse which his Spirit was ready to give them. But how unspeakably more solemn does the idea become when we reflect, that at the moment we are about to enter on this high and

holy exercise of holding intercourse with God, our thoughts may be preoccupied, and our affections entangled with some sinful or frivolous subject; that instead of being intensely fixed in holy meditation on the divine majesty and glory, we may scarcely if at all have any realizing or reverential sense of his presence; and that instead of being ready to receive the communications of his grace, and surrender ourselves to the quickening energy of his power, we may be cherishing sentiments calculated to resist, or counteract the gracious influence of his Spirit! I fear that the state which I have thus supposed is one, in which it is no rare thing for Christians to find themselves; and that in proof of this melancholy fact, they have only to take a survey of their religious exercises, and call to mind the sentiments and feelings with which they have too frequently engaged in them. They cannot require to be told that prayer, meditation, reading the Scriptures, and hearing the word, are ordinances of God's appointment; that if they are so, then that very appointment necessarily implies a promise, that there the Spirit of God will be ready to meet with his people, to impart to them of the spiritual blessings which it is his to bestow; and that as often, therefore, as they engage in them, they are professedly waiting on him for the fulfilment of this promise. And if such were their abiding impression regarding the

solemnity and sacredness of these exercises, how different would be their manner of observing them from what it frequently is! How ready would they be to engage in them, lest by neglecting them, they should be wilfully withdrawing themselves from under a divine influence, and forfeiting the blessing which was ready to be bestowed! And when they did engage in them, how anxious would they be to do so in a state of mind befitting the majesty and greatness of him, with whom they were about to hold intercourse! When Christians, therefore, reflect how far short they have frequently come of such a state of preparedness for those holy duties—how frequently the language of prayer has flowed from their lips, while scarcely one devout aspiration has arisen from their heart—how often they have read the Scriptures while they hardly recollected that they were perusing the words of eternal life, dictated by the Spirit of God, and addressed to them as sinners; and in how many instances they have waited on the ministry of the word, with views and feelings but little favourable to the admission of its holy and sanctifying influence; what humiliation and self-abasement must such a view bring with it, and how solemnly must it inculcate upon them the doctrine of our text!

But if even at those seasons which are especially set apart for holding communion with God,

supplicating the aids of his Spirit, and waiting for the communications of his grace, they are so much in danger of forgetting the apostle's admonition; how much more prone must they be to lose sight of it in the ordinary intercourse of life, where so much is perpetually occurring to awaken unholy passions, and minister to the strength of unsanctified principles! and when we bear in mind, that then as well as at any other season, the ascendency of every unhallowed sentiment goes directly to counteract the gracious operation of divine grace, how much reason is there for reminding them that "it is God which worketh in them, both to will and to do;" that opposition and resistance on their part must provoke and grieve his Holy Spirit; and that if they would experience his consolations, and enjoy a sense of his favour, they must be working out their own salvation with fear and trembling! The believer, it is true, may not by such occasional backslidings, actually forfeit his peace, or be utterly bereft of his hopes; for God may not have dealt with him as he has sinned. But to say that his sorrow need not be so poignant, because he is assured that such an offence has not finally separated him from the love of his heavenly Father, would appear to him an unspeakable aggravation of his guilt. For in what light should we contemplate conduct like this, on the part even of one human being to another? What for ex-

ample, should we say of the man who, after having wounded the feelings, and grieved the heart of an affectionate father, should make light of his offences, and manifest no symptoms of contrition for his crimes, because he is assured, that however deeply his father might be offended, his paternal affection would not permit him to carry his resentment so far, as actually to disinherit and cast him off? Is there one human being, not altogether lost to every virtuous feeling, and every generous sentiment, who could hear such a plea without abhorrence? And can the Christian, then, on grounds like these, recollect without the deepest humiliation, those offences by which he has grieved the holy Spirit of God? The very mercy and forbearance which he has experienced, must give inexpressible bitterness to his sorrow; and as often as he recollects his past delinquencies, they will prove a new motive to him "to work out his own salvation with fear and trembling," seeing that "it is God who worketh in him, both to will and to do of his good pleasure."

FINIS.

PRINTED BY A. BALFOUR AND CO.